

The Friendship Experiences of Academic High Achievers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

Submitted by Ms. Lee Chui Fan to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree
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Abstract

A wealth of academic research and anecdotal accounts show that friendship experiences have an influential impact on wellbeing and the impact of friendships is particularly crucial in adolescence. Driven by the researcher's professional experience as a teacher of students with exceptionally high academic achievements, this study aimed to explore the school friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong mainstream secondary schools so as to acquire a more in-depth understanding of characteristics of the school friendship experiences of these unique individuals.

To solicit the first-person voices of the participants, this study broadly followed the principles of narrative inquiry. Through semi-structured interviews, narratives of the secondary school friendship experiences of ten academically high achieving Hong Kong students who all obtained outstanding results in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination were presented. Broadly following the framework of thematic analysis, three broad themes on the significance of friendship experiences of these participants were established. Theme 1: Friendship needs illustrated how these academic high achievers' instrumental needs, emotional needs, personal growth, values and self-actualisation were satisfied in their interactions with school friends. Their friends took up different roles, contributed to their emotional wellbeing and facilitated their academic and personal development. Theme 2: Friendship processes delineated the development of school friendships from their start, to consolidation and elevation. In the process, similarity, shared activities and educational trajectory, intimacy and altruism were factors determining the sustainability and quality of friendships. Theme 3: Specific personal and contextual factors of academic high achievers' friendship experiences in Hong Kong secondary schools presented how their academic high achiever identity and qualities put them into specific school and classroom contexts and shaped their interactions and relationships with their schoolmates and school friends, which were characterized by the interplay of similarity and diversity, dependence and independence. Under these three broad themes, associating with existing literature on adolescents and academically gifted students, this study also revealed several specific issues which were found significant in the participants' diverse and complex narratives of their school friendship experiences including: sense of security, love and belonging, self-esteem, self-actualisation, chumship, altruism, homophily, gender, loneliness, intimacy and ability grouping.

These ten participants' friendship experiences in secondary school formed a generally positive picture of academically gifted adolescents' friendship developments in secondary schools.

Most of them showed flexibility and maturity in their perceptions, expectations and handling of friendships. Largely supporting existing literature, homophily encouraged friendships and competition among high achieving friends could be either negative or positive depending on its motivation. Sharing of leisure activities and personal feelings were ways to establish closeness and sustain friendships while many of the participants maintained certain degrees of academic and emotional independence. However, there were also complex and nuanced intra- and inter-personal differences among participants.

Keywords: friendships, friendship experiences, academic high achievers, academically gifted, Hong Kong secondary schools

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Definitions of key terms/ list of acronyms

5:** The highest grade awarded in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education.

Band 1 school: A secondary school in Hong Kong which attracts a high proportion of its student intake from students who were allocated to band 1 in the Secondary School Places Allocation system

Banding system: See SSPA

Block system: A mechanism for allowing students to select elective subjects. Typically, students would be required to choose one subject from - or rank preferences in - each of a number of blocks, thus allowing students to select individualised combinations of subjects within the constraints of a school's timetable.

Core subjects: In the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education, all students are required to sit examinations in the core subjects of Mathematics, Chinese Language and Culture, English Language, and Liberal Studies.

CUHK: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

EDB: Education Bureau – the government department which is responsible for education in Hong Kong.

Elective subjects: In the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education, in addition to their core subjects, students normally choose to sit examinations in two or three other subjects selected from a wide range of options.

EMB: Education and Manpower Bureau – a government department which was previously responsible for education in Hong Kong

High banding school: A secondary school in Hong Kong which attracts a high proportion of its student intake from students who were allocated to a high band in the Secondary School Places Allocation system

HKALE: Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. An examination previously taken by students in Hong Kong at the age of 18 at the end of Secondary 7 as part of the two-stage secondary examination system which was replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma in Secondary Education in 2012

HKCEE: Hong Kong Certificate of Secondary Education Examination. An examination previously taken by students in Hong Kong at the age of 16 at the end of Secondary 5 as part of the two-stage secondary examination system which was replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma in Secondary Education in 2012

HKDSE: Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. A single-stage examination taken at the end of secondary education in Hong Kong. Students typically sit examinations in four core subjects and two or three elective subjects.

HKDSE grading system: Grades are awarded on a scale from 1 (the lowest grade awarded) to 5**. Grades from 1 to 5 are set with reference to grade descriptors, while 5* is awarded to the top 30% of candidates achieving a grade 5, and 5** is awarded to the top 10% of students achieving a grade 5.

HKEAA: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, a non-governmental body responsible for setting and administering public examinations in Hong Kong

HKSAR: Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

HKU: The University of Hong Kong

Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education: A non-governmental organisation providing research-based information and support to all gifted students aged 10-18 and teachers across Hong Kong.

JUPAS: Joint University Programmes Admission System – a unified system for applying for places on undergraduate courses at universities in Hong Kong

K1-K3: Kindergarten years 1 to 3. Preschool education in Hong Kong is optional but is subsidised by the government through a voucher scheme. Most children in Hong Kong attend kindergarten for three years between the ages of two and five.

Low banding school: A secondary school in Hong Kong which takes a high proportion of its student intake from students who were allocated to low band in the Secondary School Places Allocation system

M1: Mathematics Module 1 – an optional Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Mathematics extension paper covering Calculus and Statistics

M2: Mathematics Module 2 – an optional Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Mathematics extension paper covering Calculus and Algebra

Mathematics Olympiad: An international Mathematics competition for secondary school students

OM – Odyssey of the Mind. An international competition in which teams of secondary school students work together to display creativity and problem-solving skills

P1-P6: Primary 1 to Primary 6. Students in Hong Kong typically attend primary school for six years between the ages of 6 and 11.

Physics Olympiad: An international Physics competition for secondary school students.

Principals' Discretionary Places Allocations: Under the Secondary School Places Allocation system, secondary schools are allowed to reserve up to 30% of their Secondary 1 places to allocation at the principal's discretion. Schools which allocate places in this manner are required to publish the criteria and weightings that they use in their application process.

S1-S6: Secondary 1 to Secondary 6. Students in Hong Kong typically attend secondary school for six years between the ages of 12 and 17.

SEN: Special Educational Needs

SSPA: Secondary School Places Allocation system. Students in Hong Kong are placed in one of three allocation bands (and nine sub-bands) at the end of Primary 6 based on the standardised results of internal assessments conducted in their primary schools during Primary 5 and Primary 6. The applications of students in the highest allocation band are considered first in the computerised system which allocates school places.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research project began in 2018. While the data collection and analysis were being undertaken, Hong Kong experienced unprecedented political, social and public health crises. Situated against such context of prolonged social unrest and the outbreak of coronavirus in Hong Kong, both of which led to profound mental and physical impacts on Hong Kong people (Leung, 2019), this research originated from an ultimate concern for the wellbeing of young people in Hong Kong. While the political and social upheavals at the time of writing are likely to have caused far-reaching long term impacts to the lives of all people, far exceeding a relatively narrow discussion on adolescents' friendship experiences, the understanding of Hong Kong secondary school student experiences with a specific focus on their school friendships was hoped to enrich discussions on Hong Kong students' psychological and educational needs, so that students in Hong Kong would be offered suitable support and they would continue to develop and demonstrate resilience and positivity in combating all odds in their lives.

In order to give readers a better understanding of the educational context of Hong Kong before embarking on the exploration of the friendship experiences of the academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools, the first chapter – *Introduction* - begins with a brief introduction of Hong Kong's education system, characteristics of Hong Kong's school culture and of Hong Kong secondary school students, followed by an explanation of the rationale of the research topic and the specific context of the project in relation to the researcher's professional background and its impact on this research. The second chapter - *Literature Review* - presents a selective and brief review of existing literature on areas related to this research topic. In the third chapter – *Methodology* - the paradigmatic position taken in this research and the rationale for adopting narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology as well as the methods and ethical concerns involved are explained. In the fourth and fifth chapters - *Findings* and *Discussion of Findings* -, the findings are reported thematically, based on participants' narratives, and some of the specific topics are subsequently discussed with reference to existing theoretical and research literature. The final chapter includes a conclusion to the findings of this research and to the research project, its contribution to knowledge, implications for practice and limitations.

1.1 Hong Kong education system and school structures

Hong Kong, previously a British overseas territory for 99 years until 1997, is now a Special Administrative Region of China. While over 95% of the residents in Hong Kong are Chinese

and there are close social and cultural ties between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese, Hong Kong is an international city heavily influenced by western culture and with government and education systems which were modelled closely on the British system, at least until 1997. However, in the last two decades, changes have been more noticeable in many dimensions of Hong Kong people's lives, including in the education sector. One major change has been the implementation of a six-year programme of secondary education leading to a single exit examination, replacing the former system which was modelled on British O and A level examinations (EDB, 2019). Some general information on the education system at the time of this research is provided in the following sections.

1.1.1 Hong Kong education structure

According to the data provided by the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (EDB, 2019), the education system in Hong Kong is structured into four stages: kindergarten for children from 2-3 to 5 years old (K1-K3); primary education for children from 6 to 12 years old (P1-P6); secondary education for young people from 12 to 17 years old (S1-S6), leading to a single exit examination: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE); and post-secondary and higher education for school leavers including government-funded or self-funded university degree, associated degree and diploma courses provided by nine major universities and other recently established tertiary institutes.

Kindergartens in Hong Kong are all privately run and fee-paying. Parents can apply for kindergarten vouchers of a fixed amount from the government and the operations of kindergartens are largely subject to government supervision but attendance at kindergartens is optional. Nine years of compulsory education for children last from 6 to 15 years old, that is from P1 to S3, and free education is provided from 6 to 17 years old, that is from P1 to S6. In the 2019/20 school year, including private schools, there were 587 primary schools, 504 secondary day schools, and 61 special schools in Hong Kong. Among the 587 primary schools, 301,891 children were enrolled in 456 public sector primary schools from P1 to P6. Among the 504 secondary schools, 255,425 students were enrolled in 473 public sector secondary schools from S1 to S6. Most primary and secondary schools in the public sector were either run by the government directly or by non-government organisations under the subsidy of the government. Private schools were mostly international schools which accounted for a very small percentage of the Hong Kong education sector. Special schools were attended

by students with more profound special needs such as severe physical or mental disabilities, hearing impairment or visual impairment (EDB, 2018, 2019).

1.1.2 Secondary education in Hong Kong

In 2019/20, in Hong Kong there were 473 secondary day schools which were publicly-funded either under direct management of the Education Bureau (known as government schools); or under the management of non-government organisations but financially supported by the government and subject to government supervision and scrutiny (known as aided schools or direct subsidy schools). These 504 government, aided or direct subsidy schools were attended by the vast majority of Hong Kong students and therefore were considered as mainstream schools. Government and aided schools normally operate under the same system in which school places are allocated in a standardised dual process of central allocation (70% of the school places in each new S1 school year) and Principal Discretionary Places Allocation (30% of the school places in each new S1 school year). Government and aided schools implement a standardised education structure and curriculum in terms of enrolment, subject choices, teacher-student ratio, school facilities and school days. Students in these schools take the HKDSE as their exit exam. Different from government and aided schools, Direct Subsidy Schools receive funding from the government based on the number of students enrolled, and have autonomy to charge extra fees from students and adopt their own selection criteria of new students. These schools also have more flexibility in class structure, exam curriculum, subject choices, staff recruitment and school management.

1.1.3 Banding system of secondary schools and secondary school places allocation mechanism in Hong Kong

According to the information provided by the Education Bureau (EDB, 2019), secondary schools in the public sector in Hong Kong are classified according to a banding system in which nine bands (1A,1B,1C, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B and 3C) are set based on statistical studies of students' attainment in the territory-wide assessments held in S1 (when students are in the first year of secondary school at about the age of 12) and S3 (when students are in the third year of secondary school at about the age of 15) conducted by the Education Bureau. Primary schools submit their students' internal examination results to the Education Bureau and a rank order is given to every P6 student mainly based on their own internal exam results and on the performance of previous P6 graduates from the same primary school in the Pre-S1 attainment tests which are conducted in a strictly standardised format in July every year in all secondary schools. Under such rank order and banding systems, in the final year of primary education,

teachers will advise students and their parents on their secondary school options by matching the students' ranks with the bandings of the schools. For example, a student in a high rank is likely to be advised to choose schools of bands 1A, 1B or 1C. All secondary schools receive the data of rank orders of the P6 students who apply to their schools by the Education Bureau and these rank orders are the key reference for secondary schools to assess applicants' academic levels (EDB, 2019).

As mentioned above, mainstream schools normally admit new S1 students through a dual system of central allocation and Principal Discretionary Places allocation. Under the central allocation mechanism which takes up 70% of the school places allocation, the schools that applicants can choose from are mostly within their district. Apart from matching the rank orders of applicants with the banding of the schools they apply to, a random number regardless of their academic performance is given to each student. This random number determines the priority of school places allocation for students who are within the same range of rank orders and who choose the schools in the same band. In tandem with the central allocation mechanism, students can apply to a maximum of two schools of their own choice through the Principal Discretionary Places Allocation regardless of the catchment areas they belong to. They can submit applications to two of their preferred government or aided schools while at the same time applying through the central allocation mechanism.

Unlike government and aided schools, Direct Subsidy Schools have higher autonomy on school places allocation. These schools usually set their own entrance requirements and their application and student selection exercise is independent from the Education Bureau. However, if students opt for Direct Subsidy Schools, their applications will be withdrawn from the central allocation or discretionary places allocation exercises. These special arrangements for Direct Subsidy Schools give rise to a specific student and school culture: only those who can afford the extra fees and are confident of gaining a place through the complex interviewing or selection procedures would apply to Direct Subsidy Schools as by doing so they will forgo their chance of getting into a government or aided school. Although there are three systems of secondary school places allocation/applications concurrently existing in Hong Kong, it appears that academic performance against their peers is a main consideration in the student selection mechanism, especially for those most sought-after, academic-driven higher tier secondary schools.

1.1.4 Secondary school leavers' promotion to tertiary education in Hong Kong

Students start S1 at about the age of 12 and complete secondary education in S6 at about 17. At the end of S6, over 75 percent of students take the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) (EDB, 2019, HKEAA 2019) as the exit examination of secondary education and entry examination for further or university education. Under the Joint University Placements and Allocations Scheme (JUPAS), allocation to university places at local tertiary institutions is mainly based on students' HKDSE results and their performance in admission interviews. In 2018, out of 46,346 JUPAS applicants, 16,538 were offered places on full-time bachelor's degree programmes and 3,581 were offered places on associate degree and higher diploma programmes (JUPAS Office, 2018). Local universities in Hong Kong specify different HKDSE scores for admission to their programmes and their score calculation formulas vary slightly. On the whole, each JUPAS applicant's merit order is calculated based on the scores of either their best 5 subjects or their results in 4 core subjects (English Language, Chinese Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies) and 1 elective subject. However, some very competitive university degree programmes including medicine, law and actuarial science use an entrance score formula based on students' 6 best subjects and give additional weighting to certain preferred subjects such as, for medicine, English Language and Chemistry. Because of these subject requirements, the applicants admitted to the most sought-after programmes such as Medicine normally studied a certain group of specified subjects and obtained very high scores, many of them even obtaining scores at or close to the maximum possible score in the HKDSE.

1.1.5 Academic achievement/ performance-oriented school culture

From the above descriptions of the Hong Kong education system from primary to secondary school and university places allocation, it can be seen that at a very early age Hong Kong students are told that their academic performance and their rankings among their peers determine their education prospects. Primary school students are taught that their academic positions compared with their classmates and all students in the territory affect their secondary school choices. Furthermore, most secondary school students understand that subject allocation in senior secondary – that is S4-S6, which is usually based on their academic results and rankings in S3 can affect their prospect of getting into certain university degree programmes. For example, students who wish to study medicine must study Chemistry in senior secondary. Students who wish to study actuarial science must have Mathematics Module 2 in senior secondary (JUPAS, 2019). Likewise, in S6, students know their HKDSE results determine their

university choices. This situation is especially obvious in competitive degree programmes such as medicine for which the mean entrance score is 38 out of a maximum possible score of 42 (of six HKDSE subjects), 7 points being the highest and 1 the lowest score for each of six HKDSE subjects (JUPAS 2019). Furthermore, among the S6 academic high achievers in the top Band 1 schools, competition exists in applications for scholarships such as the Sir Edward Youde Scholarship (WFSFAA, 2019) or special nominations schemes to local universities such as the JUPAS Principal Nominations Scheme (JUPAS 2019), which gives conditional offers or bonus points to successful nominees, with the nominations made by secondary school heads normally being based on students' academic, leadership and other extra-curricular performances in comparison to other students in the same year group, and these selection criteria being specified and made public on the application forms. In short, most students in Hong Kong know how important their academic performance, exam results and rankings are to their future. There is a general belief that being an academic high achiever in secondary school in Hong Kong opens doors to more opportunities.

Such an exam performance-oriented school system across primary to secondary and university education inevitably influences learning and teaching in Hong Kong schools. As teachers, parents and students face the reality that marks and rankings in school determine their future, in everyday structural and non-structural school interactions, a lot of attention, time, energy and resources are thus invested on making sure that students perform well in exams and in other formal academic assessment. For example, in many schools in Hong Kong, it is a common practice that students in senior forms have extra lessons or exam practice during school holidays especially in the summer vacation after S4 and S5 for exam preparation. Many teachers also arrange after-school or lunch time academically related learning on a daily basis. After-school exam-drill tutorial classes run by private tutorial centres have also become a main part of schooling among a large number of secondary school students (Bray, 2007). As commented by Bray, these after-school tutorial classes do not only take up a considerable amount of students' time, energy and money but also affect students' attitude and needs towards their schoolmates and teachers.

1.2 Characteristics of Hong Kong students

1.2.1 High performance, long study hours

Under the performance-driven education system, and the influence of Confucian culture which places great importance on education (Tan, 2013), although showing a drop in their performance in sciences, Hong Kong students have been found to remain among the best in the world in assessments of their performance in mathematics, sciences and reading ability (PISA 2015, PISA 2018). However, Hong Kong students' achievements in PISA came with a price: The PISA reports (2015, 2018) also found that Hong Kong students had some of the longest learning hours compared to students in other regions (PISA 2015). This finding is supported by the report presented by the Research Office of the Legislative Council Secretariat (2018) which found that schooling time in Hong Kong accounted for 7 hours per day, homework time ranged from 1.0 to 2.4 hours per day, and over 80% of Hong Kong school-aged children receive private tuition (Bray, 2010, Bray & Lykins, 2012).

1.2.2 Low life satisfaction, high study pressure

Apart from the long study hours, the PISA reports (PISA 2015, 2018) also presented a less positive picture of their emotional wellbeing: Hong Kong students ranked low on life satisfaction, low on sense of belonging, and low on motivation to learn and to read (despite ranking high on reading ability). Hong Kong students also reported a higher than average level of being bullied, a higher level of loneliness, higher occurrence of not being able to find a way out when facing difficulties, and a significantly higher level of seeing their peers as competitors. They were more likely than students in other territories to worry about what others think of them when they experienced failure (PISA, 2018). The impact of academic and study pressure on Hong Kong adolescents' emotional wellbeing has become a pressing concern after a rising number of suicide cases involving school-aged children and teenagers in Hong Kong, prompting the Hong Kong government to commission an investigation into this phenomenon (Yip, 2016). The chairperson of this investigation suggests that over-emphasis on academic achievements is a major factor in Hong Kong school-aged young people's worsening mental wellbeing (Yip, 2016). Resonating with the PISA findings and Yip's report, two surveys conducted locally in Hong Kong (Research office, Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018; the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016) also found that "study pressure", "parental relationships" and "teachers and classmates" were three main issues influencing their levels of happiness. In particular, the report pointed out that negative relationships with their parents, teachers and classmates reduced Hong Kong students' level of happiness.

Although the rise in student suicides in the last five years might have triggered an awakening of concern towards Hong Kong students' emotional wellbeing, the issue of Hong Kong students facing heavy academic pressure is in fact not a new topic among the education sector in Hong Kong. Long before the most recent PISA reports were released, the director of the PISA Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong studied the impact of the high-stakes examination-oriented education system on Hong Kong students (Ho, 2006). Ho argued that high-stakes exams had led to a host of negative outcomes to Hong Kong students academically, emotionally and socially. By comparing the PISA figures available at the time of her study on self-concepts, number of hours of after-school learning, percentage of collaborative learning and competitive learning modes, she pointed out that Hong Kong students suffered from low self-esteem and high anxiety levels even though they performed well in many international studies. She argued that the exam-oriented education culture produced detrimental effects on students' learning performance, school segregation, school life after school, learning environment, self-concept and anxiety. She further cited another research study that concluded:

"Although we cannot attribute high stakes testing to all of the negative characteristics reviewed here, which include school segregation, low self-concept, and highly competitive and stressful learning environment directly, there is a cyclical trend such that the months of May, June and July are the peak suicide months among students taking such tests. In Hong Kong, these months coincide with the time when most public examinations are held and candidates' results are disclosed" (Tse, 2000, cited in, Ho, 2006. p.84).

The above PISA findings and comments made by Hong Kong academics present a general picture of Hong Kong adolescents' school life and their emotional wellbeing which can have an interactive impact on their interpersonal experiences. This general picture provides a backdrop for this study on Hong Kong adolescents' friendship experiences in such a specific social and educational context.

1.3 Contextual educational setting of the research

While this introduction has portrayed a broad picture of the Hong Kong education system and students' characteristics, it is possible that different schools and different students may have their own unique features and experiences in their specific contexts even when they are all situated in the same broad educational entity. To provide readers a specific contextual dimension of this study, the following is an introduction to the school which was attended by

eight out of the ten participants in this research project and which was the school where before carrying out the research for this project, I worked as a teacher for 20 years. Introducing this particular school, apart from offering readers an example of a broadly typical mainstream secondary school, also underscores the specific context which led to the participants' unique experiences in this study.

At least until the time when this study was conducted, the secondary school where the majority of participants of this research studied was a Band 1A English-medium government boys' school in Hong Kong. According to the information provided on the school's website and its school profile available for public access online (CHSC, 2019) this school operated under the mainstream local secondary school structure. The school had classes from S1 to S6. There were 4 classes in each year group and each class had around 36 students. S1 to S3 students studied a broad curriculum with about eight to ten subjects ranging from languages, humanities, sciences and sports to music. From S4 onwards, students specialised in three elective subjects and four core compulsory subjects. The allocation of elective subjects for S4 to S6 was mainly based on students' exam results in S3 and their rankings in the year group. As in this school Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics were the most popular subjects, students with higher subject-specific and overall rankings were given priority in subject allocation to study Advanced Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics. This subject allocation mechanism led to the situation that the high achievers in S3 tended to study in the same homeroom and subject class(es) in S4 to S6 with other equally strong students and almost all of them studied Mathematics II (an advanced module of mathematics) and three sciences.

This school had a strong culture of senior students taking up leadership roles or being the mentors of the junior students. There were well-established Discipline Prefect and Counselling Prefect bodies which were run mainly by the senior-form students. The counselling team prefects organised a wide range of social activities and long-term programmes to facilitate same-year and cross-year group interactions and the development of friendships among schoolmates. Although many students attended after-school subject-specific tutorial classes in school or outside school, there were also a wide range of extra-curricular activities in sports, social service, music and both academic and non-academic interest areas which were run by the students themselves such as the school orchestra and the Mathematics and Physics Olympiad teams. As the school had more than 40 clubs and societies, many students in S4 and S5 took up leadership roles in clubs, societies and school function teams. The school provided two study rooms open to all students until 8 pm every day. These were supervised by the school

prefects with teachers' supervision being minimal. Such a school environment and established practices gave students opportunities and provided an environment for socialising with schoolmates on campus after lessons.

To many Hong Kong people, this school was considered to be one of the most prestigious schools in Hong Kong due to its long history and excellent public examinations results. Every year there was wide coverage in the press of the school's secondary 1 admission interviews and HKDSE results. Reporters always waited with the expectation that the school would produce students with some of the highest public exam results, and in fact, this had consistently been true since the school was founded more than a hundred years ago. The massive attention from the media and the public to the students' academic achievements created and reinforced a strong academic/exam-results-driven school culture among students, parents and teachers. Although many aspects of this school's administration and provision were similar to other mainstream secondary schools in Hong Kong, the outstanding academic achievements and academic school ethos of this school created a unique context for the study of academic high achievers.

The above section introduces the general educational context of this research. The following sections explain the rationale for selecting the research question for this research.

1.4 Rationale for the research topic

1.4.1 Rationale for focusing on academic high achievers: professional interests

My interest in exploring the school friendships of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools stemmed from my experiences of teaching in a school as described above where many students were recognised as academic high achievers. My everyday interactions with students in this particular school context led to my supposition that although they might have appeared to be strong and able, secondary school students who excel academically may face certain personal or social issues due to their unique academic backgrounds and identities. The internal and external recognition of these academic high achievers' exceptional academic results and high rankings in one of the top schools in Hong Kong seemed to have created a specific and unique impact on their learning and social lives at school. This research was built upon a conjecture that the unique academic background and personal characteristics marked

by the performance-based recognition of these students being academically superior to their peers may create a complex impact on their school friendship experiences, or vice versa.

1.4.2 Rationale for focusing on friendship: insights from academic literature

In this research, among myriads of complex factors that influence a student's school experience, friendship was hypothesized to be one of the very crucial elements. In cultural wisdom, the notion that "friends are important" does not seem to attract much challenge. For example, in traditional Chinese collective culture, proverbs such as "When you are at home, you rely on your parents; when you are outside (of your home), you rely on your friends" or "You will have no regret when you die if you once had a good friend" are taken for granted as cultural truths. In tandem with my professional experiences and general cultural assumptions, my exposure to friendship studies was continuously enriched through my academic studies in SEN, counselling and education in the past years as part of the professional training I received in the PGCE and EdD programmes. The academic literature I read provided me a general foundation for my understanding of how friendship has been theorised, discussed and challenged in the academic community from early times until recent years.

The assumption that friends are important is largely supported by a rich tradition of studies on the importance of friendship to people of different ages and in different settings (Piaget, 1932; Maslow, 1943; Sullivan, 1953; Leyden, 1985; Krappman, 1996; Bagwell et al., 1998; Rubin et al., 2004; Berndt, 2004). In particular, in one recent report of an 80-year-long study, it has been found that people who had good friends were protected from mental and physical decline, and having good friends is more indicative of how long a person's life will be than social class, IQ or genes (Waldinger et al. 2017). On the other hand, against such a sweeping acceptance of the assumption that friendship is important to people's personal and social development, and such a rich body of research supporting this view, there have been on-going research projects which have attempted to unpack the intricacies of friendship, especially among children and adolescents. These projects have posed further questions which deserved academic attention. For example, friendship continues to be a well-researched phenomenon that has an impact on a range of developmental outcomes. Benner et al. (2019) studied the consequences of friend-related stress across early adolescence among 1000 middle-school students, and found that those with high-level friend-related stress showed poorer socio-emotional well-being and lower academic engagement; Romera et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study of school children's social preference, perceived popularity, and friendship in trajectories of

victimization and found that chronic victims' friendship experiences were characterized with rejection and isolation by their classmates. Becht et al. (2020) conducted a self-report survey and neuro-imaging study, and their outcomes affirmed the hypothesis that high-quality friendship was associated with the development of the social brain which includes the prefrontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, posterior superior temporal sulcus and precuneus. Their findings suggested that while adolescents showed a general pattern of development, there were individual inter- and intra-personal differences in social brain development (cortical thickness) which indicated correlations with the adolescents' varied friendship developments. Apart from confirming the significance of having and maintaining friendships as proposed by past and present academics and researchers as mentioned, Rubin et al. (2017) raised questions about whether friendships really promote positive inter- and intrapersonal development, and about how gender, ethnicity, cultural contexts, personal characteristics and subjective perceptions influence friendship experiences.

Based on long-established general understandings on the significance of friendship, and on the intricate and unresolved complex questions in friendship studies arising from decades of academic research in the fields of psychology, sociology and education, this research was an academic effort to further explore the intricacies of friendship developments among a specific, broadly homogenous group of people, that is academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. The intention behind this research was to acquire a deeper understanding of the complex and unique meanings of friendships to secondary school students who shared similar yet unique contextual characteristics.

1.4.3 Personal rationale for focusing on academic high achievers and friendship experiences

As mentioned, my observations of students' development in a school with a large number of top performing students shaped my research interest. This research interest was accentuated by one of my experiences when I took up the duty of being in charge of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Career Guidance in the school. My dual responsibilities gave me opportunities to have close contact with many students who had SENs or/and strong academic abilities.

One most striking experience occurred around ten years ago with a student who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This student showed exceptional academic abilities right from the beginning of S1, always ranking in the top 10 of the form even when he was absent from school or lessons frequently. However, he had serious adjustment and inter-personal problems

that led to frequent episodes of misbehaviour posing risks of physical harm to himself, his classmates and teachers. He was hospitalised for considerable periods of time in the junior years. However, when he was promoted to S4 and he was accompanied by a group of students who were deliberately arranged by teachers to be in the same class, I observed that he transformed into a very different person. Except for some minor problems, he was in general happy, engaged and healthy throughout his three years of senior secondary and obtained outstanding results in the HKDSE Examinations, being in the top 20 out of a candidate population of over 60,000. When I asked why he could have such a positive transformation in the senior school years, both he and his parents replied that it was all because of his best friend. Although this experience might appear anecdotal, it led to my belief that a good friendship can be a powerful protection for vulnerable, albeit academically able, young people against the problems and obstacles they face in adolescence. This experience stimulated my curiosity in exploring the friendship experiences of academically strong students with specific educational needs.

At the beginning of my planning for my research, the initial focus was on the friendship needs of students with special educational needs (SEN). However, after further reading and engaging in insightful academic discussions in the first year of the EdD programme, I developed a broader understanding of the continuum nature of students' educational needs. Therefore I turned to combine my awareness and understanding of the needs of students with SEN and the academically gifted which I developed through my work, and embarked on an exploration of the complex interrelationship between friendship and the unique school experiences of academic high achievers with or without SEN in this EdD study.

1.5 Topic of the research project

The research title is: The Friendship Experiences of Academic High Achievers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools. The research topic focused on the school friendship experiences of secondary school students in Hong Kong who attained outstanding academic achievements. This project was set out based on the assumptions that people's experiences are complex and contextual. Therefore, due to their particular backgrounds, qualities and circumstances, it was believed that academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools' friendship needs and experiences are varied and complex. It was hoped that through qualitative semi-structured interviews to solicit participants' personal and complex accounts of their friendship

experiences at school, further understandings of the friendship experiences of the academic high achieving adolescents in Hong Kong could be acquired, thus enriching academic discussions on catering for the diverse educational needs of students.

After this introductory chapter, the following chapters include a Literature Review on topics related to this research, Methodology, Report of Findings and Discussion of Findings, and a final chapter including a Conclusion, with Contribution to Knowledge, Implications for Practice, Strengths and Limitations, and Directions for Future Research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Search and selection of literature

Academic literature and official articles published by governmental and international organisations were located from a range of sources including Google Scholar, databases such as Sage Knowledge, Education Research Complete and PsycINFO and HKU Scholars Hub. The first phase of literature search and review was conducted from December 2018 to March 2019. Academic literature on three broad areas - friendship, academic high achievers/the academically gifted, and Hong Kong adolescents - was read. This broad approach to literature review aimed to form a general basis of understanding on the relevant research areas and subsequently for establishing the research topic and informing the interview design of this research project. The second phase of literature review was conducted from December 2019 to April 2020, and this took place after the data collected from the first-round interviews had been initially coded. Key concepts derived from the first-round of coding of the interview data guided the choice of further literature review. Codes established in the data analysis of first-round interviews, including: loneliness, aloneness, stress, reciprocity, intimacy, similarity and proximity, ability grouping, self-disclosure, companionship, students with disabilities and friendship needs of students with autism, were put into the search. Some of the related literature was reviewed to inform the design of the second-round interview questions and some more focused search and review of literature was conducted to inform the write-up of the Discussion of Findings chapter.

Given the vast amount of relevant literature and the word requirement of this EdD thesis, this literature review starts with selective highlights of some fundamental academic discussions on the key areas on friendship. These are followed by more specific literature, including friendship needs and functions of friendship, definitions and nature of friendship, adolescents' friendships, adolescents' school friendship development and its relationship with levels of academic ability. The second part of this literature review focuses on academic high achievers or academically gifted students including definitions of "giftedness", general characteristics of gifted children and young people, discrepant findings indicating within-group differences and complexities, Hong Kong gifted students' personal and emotional development, and friendship of academic high achievers. The last part of the chapter reviews studies on specific topics: ability grouping, teachers, and friendship experiences of students in an inclusive school setting, similarity in friendship, gender and extra-curricular activities in friendship development.

2.2 Literature on general topics of friendship

2.2.1 Friendship needs and functions of friendship

Among a wealth of diverse literature on friendship, there has been a long academic tradition of studying the importance of friendship to people's personal and social development. Psychologists and social scientists in the last century including Piaget (1932), Sullivan (1953) and Maslow (1943) asserted that friendships are crucial to a person's emotional wellbeing and personal growth. Piaget (1932) suggested that friends are important to children's development as, differently from their interactions with parents, with friends children experience relatively more balanced social interactions, power assertion and dominance, and through these interactions children develop intra-personal qualities and inter-personal skills. Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (1943) and Sullivan's interpersonal theory (1953) suggest that intimacy and love experienced in friendship is the foundation for a person to fulfil his other needs, to feel accomplished and to achieve one's full potential. Furman & Buhrmester (1985) and Rubin, Bukowski & Parker (2006) followed Piaget's and Sullivan's assertions and suggested that friendships have the general functions of contributing to a person's growth as they provide "services" including affection, good company and fun, emotional security, helpfulness, advice, instrumental aid, validation of interests, hopes and fears, opportunities for intimate disclosure, and prototypes for later romantic, marital and parental relationships (Rubin et al, 2008). The above references show that friendship has been discussed and theorised for decades, more up-to-date studies have also attracted significant attentions from scholars in the recent years. For example, Rubin et al. (2009) discussed how influential friendships are to the adjustment outcomes of children and adolescents. Schneider (2016) studied childhood friendships and peer relations and highlighted the impacts of friendships on the socio-emotional development of children and adolescents.

While there appears to have been general agreement that friendships can benefit a person and that living without friendships will result in harmful impacts to a person's psychological and social development, Rubin (2017) raised a question of whether the existing literature can be taken to indicate that the experiences of friendship promote positive intra- and interpersonal development (p.4). In other words, when taking the notion of "it is always beneficial to have a friend" for granted, we may have overlooked the complex impacts of friendship. The generally positive conclusions on the needs and functions of friendships as well as the gaps highlighted

by researchers in more recent research findings indicate the importance of further exploring the complexities and intricacies underneath a seemingly unchallenged notion of friendship.

To introduce her overview of the rich and complex discussions on different aspects of friendship, in her book *Friendship Processes* (1996), Fehr sums up the academic findings and divides these into seven areas: meaning of friendship, theories of friendship, friendship formulation, achieving closeness, gender issues in friendship, friendship maintenance and deterioration and dissolution. Resonating with some of the seminal works mentioned above, the author concludes that friends meet our material, cognitive and social-emotional needs and two main features of friendship in adolescence are loyalty and intimacy. It is suggested that compared to other forms of social relationships, self-disclosure is a more significant characteristic in friendship. Although similarly to other academics in friendship studies the author reckons that there is no single definition of what friendship means, samples of definitions of friendship show that a friendship is in general a relationship which is voluntary, personal, typically providing intimacy and assistance, in which the two parties like one another and seek each other's company. Friends can be categorised according to their levels of closeness: acquaintances, friends, close friends and best friends. Fehr mentions Levinger's ABCDE model (1980) and states that the friendship process involves acquaintanceship, build-up, continuation, deterioration and ending. At the beginning stage of friendship, proximity, physical attractiveness, and similarity are influential factors for the formation of friendship; then the probability of future interaction, frequency of exposure and self-disclosure facilitate further development of friendship. In interactions with a friend, having fun and relaxation, and similarity in attitude and values are conducive to the consolidation of friendship. Self-disclosure in the form of everyday talk on various topics ranging from sports, work and hobbies to personal issues and problems is a strategy in friendship maintenance. Fehr highlights that a balance between independence and dependence, closeness and distance, and openness and self-protection has to be maintained in friendship management. She also suggests that findings on gender differences in friendship needs and interactions, including the amount of time spent on and with a friend, the nature of interactions with a friend, topics of self-disclosure and levels of intimacy, are vast but inconclusive.

2.2.2 Definitions and nature of friendship

From theology and philosophy to sociology, the diverse understandings of “a friend” or “a friendship” indicate how complex the meaning of friendship is and how it is subject to contextual cultural and social influences. As the meaning of “a friend” and what constitutes “a friendship” is context specific (Krappmann, 1996), it is difficult to construct a single universal academic definition of friendship. In her studies of the cultural variations on the meaning of the word “friend”, Krappmann (1996) summed up other academics’ work on their context-specific studies of friendship in different societies including research into the distinct features of friendship perceptions among a generation of Italian-American adolescents in the post-war period, and into the differences in friendship perceptions among better-educated or middle-class adolescents in western societies. Similarly, Policarpo (2014) studied the meaning of friendship among people of different levels of education and age in South Portugal and found that more educated and younger people emphasize trust and self-disclosure in friendship while less educated and older people tend to perceive friendship as being based on kinship ties. Such observation of intra-social and cultural differences in defining friendship is highlighted in a study of the characteristics of friendships among African American, Latino, and Asian American adolescents from low-income families (Way and Chen, 2000). Way and Chen found that ethnic minorities in America have different understandings of what constitutes a general and a close friendship. Their findings suggest that even within one specific social context, there are differences in the understanding of friendship among children and young people of different personal backgrounds including gender, popularity among peers, parent-child relationship, and personal health. Of more relevance to this research study on Chinese children and adolescents, Krappmann cited a study of Chinese children’s understanding of friendship (Keller et al, 1993) which suggests that Chinese children and young adolescents, like their Western peers, regard friendship as a personal commitment, but that they tend to “use prosocial reasons in decisions about action with friends earlier than Western children do” (Krappmann, 1996. p.25) and the researcher speculated that this difference may be attributed to the strong collectivist-oriented education system in Chinese societies. All these diverse conceptualisations of the definitions of friendship which appear in existing international academic discussions offered useful insights to this research project.

While acknowledging the difficulty in forming a single definition of friendship, academics have attempted to identify certain common features in friendships. For example, while underscoring the diversity and complexity in friendship development and friendship experiences among different individuals, Krappmann (1996) claimed that “the results on

development of the friendship concept do not contradict the assumption that children and adolescents growing up in different cultures construct a similar concept of a mutual and trustful relationship called friendship” (p.26) and such similar concepts of friendship definitions proposed by a number of scholars were summed up in Rubin et al’s (2017) more recent work which include the three generally accepted core conditions: 1. Mutual affirmation of the existence of the friendship; 2. Existence of mutual affection; and 3. The voluntary nature of the friendship (Rubin et al. 2017). In addition, some scholars suggested that the common qualitative nature of a good friendship involves homophily, which is defined as the tendency for people to form friendships with those with whom they are alike in some designated respect (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954), as well as proximity, attractiveness, trust, honesty and supportiveness (Stroebe et al. 1971, Segel, 1974, Berndt, 1996, Nisbett et al. 2005, Rubin, 2008).

2.3 Literature on specific topics of friendship studies

2.3.1 Friendships in adolescence

Many studies suggest that friends are particularly important to young people especially from the age when they begin to exert independence from their parents and extend their social network. The stage which is regarded as adolescence can be different. Blakemore & Mills (2013) suggested that adolescence is often defined as the life stage from the onset of puberty to one’s achievement of self-sufficiency. They postulated that adolescence is defined by biological events and one’s social development. In many studies, adolescence is defined by age span, for example from 13 to 17 (O’Brien & Bierman, 1988), or early and mid- adolescence being from 11 to 16 (Sebastian et al 2010). Although subject to criticisms, one of the seminal works which point to the significance of friends in pre-adolescence and adolescence is the work of Sullivan, who highlighted the importance of a high-quality same-sex friendship in pre-adolescence in his Interpersonal Theory (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan claimed that starting from pre-adolescence, a person begins to take interest in a particular person of the same sex who becomes a close friend or, as he named it, a “chum”. He claimed that having a chum marks the beginning of the manifestation of a need for interpersonal intimacy. Sullivan suggested that pre-adolescence and the need for interpersonal intimacy usually begins from the age of eight to ten and a half. Such intimacy with a close friend permits validation of self-worth. A failure to acquire interpersonal intimacy will lead to loneliness. Sullivan believed that unlike in the

juvenile era, which is characterized by competition with others, people entering pre-adolescence tend to collaborate to work for more impersonal goals. He also pointed out that some adolescents who possess high intelligence but are not popular among their less intelligent peers might turn their intelligence to good use out of the need for interpersonal intimacy by learning how to be one of the others. Sullivan also argued that when a person moves onto adolescence, he or she will turn to the opposite sex in the quest for interpersonal intimacy, so the same-sex chum is replaced by a lover of the opposite sex. Sullivan's concept of "chumship" as a developmental characteristic of pre-adolescence and his idea that adolescents will turn to the opposite sex for love instead of having a same sex chumship might not fit the descriptions of the academic high achievers being studied in this research project. However, Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory serves as reference point for a study of the close same-sex friendships of academically high achieving adolescents, and this study is in part a critique of Sullivan's ideas, for example on whether same-sex friendships will become less important in mid- or late adolescence and whether adolescents experience competitions and loneliness in their experiences of friendships.

In fact, contrary to Sullivan's notion that same-sex chumship is more (or only) significant in pre-adolescence, the importance of same-sex friendships in adolescence is supported by a number of academic studies recognising the influence of non-romantic same-sex friends among adolescents in many specific areas of their personal, social and educational development. For example, some studies find that friendship is negatively associated with loneliness and positively associated with self-regard (Park & Asher, 1993), that those without friends have lower self-esteem and more psychopathological symptoms in adulthood (Bagwell, Newcomb & Bukowski, 1998), and that those with a secure attachment to peers are better adjusted and less prone to depression or poor self-esteem when facing troubling family circumstances than those not having good friendship networks (Rubin et al, 2004, 2006). Deater-Deckard unpacked further the different types of difficult peer interactions and concluded that a difficult relationship with a friend is associated with the onset of depression and that being neglected by peers is strongly linked to internalising symptoms, but having a best friend is linked to reduced feelings of being victimized, a better buffer from troubling family environments and their impact on school experience, better transition to new school and peer milieus, higher engagement in class and better scholastic performance (Deater-Deckard, 2001).

While confirming the positive impacts of high-quality same-sex friendships, some researchers also acknowledge that not all friendships are beneficial and there are a lot more follow-up

questions to be answered when the topic of children's and young people's friendships is being explored. For instance, Rubin et al. raised eight specific questions for future enquiry. These included: "Does friendship matter in the lives of children?" - for example, do children find having friends important to them and what are the gains of children having friends?; and "Does it matter who the child's or young adolescent's friend happens to be?" - for example, do children need friends who are similar to them or do some of them prefer making friends with people of backgrounds different from their own. Rubin et al. also raised questions about "friendship provisions, reciprocity, and complementarity", "power and control", and to what extent and how friendship is "in the eye of the beholder" - for example, does one particular adolescent need and evaluate all his/her friends in the same way, or would there be intra-personal contextual differences? Rubin et al. also suggested that there should be further enquiry into other contextual variables including "sex differences", "race, ethnicity and friendship" and "culture and friendship" (Rubin et al. 2017 p.4-9). Resonating with Rubin's suggestions, other scholars have mentioned that further friendship studies could focus on issues related to friendship including gender and sibling differences, cultural diversity of friendship, friendship stability, culture, age difference and the differences between same- and other-sex friendship (Deater-Deckard, 2001, Krappmann, 1996, Bukowski et al, 1996). Although not all these aspects were addressed in this study, these topics on individual, cultural and contextual differences in friendship development provided insights to this study on same-sex school friendships.

2.3.2 Similarity in friendship

Among literature in friendship studies, similarity has been generally recognised as a crucial factor in adolescent friendship making and development. Berndt (1982) claimed that adolescent friends are similar in their orientation toward school and toward peer culture and their similarity is due to both the selection of friends like oneself and the influence of friends on each other. Linden-Andersen et al. (2009) summed up a number of studies (Epstein, 1983; Bell, 1981; Akers, Jones, & Coyl, 1998; Kandel, 1978) and pointed out that similarity of personality and other characteristics such as academic achievement, attitude towards teen culture, and identity status play a significant role in the quality of child and adolescent friendships (Linden-Andersen et al. 2009). Morry (2007) adopted an attraction-similarity model in her study and claimed that college students gain greater friendship satisfaction from greater perceived friend-self similarity for traits and behaviours. She suggested that perceptions on self-friend similarity create feelings of being understood and validated, better moods and lowered loneliness.

Although it may seem to be a general understanding that people tend to find friends who are similar to them, more detailed studies show that the findings on friendship similarity are complex and somehow inconsistent. In some earlier works in psychology, Byrne (1961, 1964, 1965) first proposed the social psychology mode of interpersonal attraction which highlights the importance of being similar in interpersonal attraction. However, in a number of his follow-up studies, he found that, among many attributes, similarity in attitudes seems to be the one aspect that facilitates friendship (Byrne et al. 1961, 1964, 1965). Contradicting Byrne's assertions, some researchers argued that adolescents are more likely to develop friendships with those who share similar activities or behaviours rather than attitudes (Kandel, 1978; Werner & Parmelee, 1979). This argument was supported by another study in which having shared enjoyable activities was found to be the most influential similarity rather than similarity in personality or values (Urberg et al. 1995). In another study which further unpacks the broad notion of similarity in attitudes and values in friendship (Campbell et al. 2015), the researchers found confusing findings that while most participants in the study agreed that their friends had similar values, these participants did not think having similar education level and life goals with their friends was important.

Evaluating the common features of a friendship, Roberts-Griffin's study (2011) argued that certain commonly agreed features of the factors of a good friendship: similarity, proximity and attractiveness can have an impact on friendship in both ways, either increasing or decreasing the likelihood of becoming close friends. His survey results suggest that dissimilarity may be a positive factor in forming a friendship. These diverse results of studies of similarity in friendship show that the more in-depth the enquiry is, the more problematic and complex our understanding of the significance of similarity in friendship. Such complexities were therefore also expected in the study of academic high achievers' friendship experiences with similar and dissimilar school friends.

2.3.3 Gender and friendship

The results of studies on gender difference in friendship have been mixed. A large amount of evidence shows that boys and girls have different expectations and means of maintaining friendships. For example, girls tend to develop more intimacy and focus more on maintaining intimacy and they also may expect a return of intimacy from their friends more than boys do (Clark & Ayers, 1992; Clark & Bittle, 1992; Foot, Chapman, & Smith, 1977, Johnson, 2007). Some studies reported that in order to achieve intimacy with friends, girls tend to use sharing

feelings and personal issues with their friends to strengthen their friendships while boys obtain and maintain friendship through shared activities (Hussong, 2000; Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1999; Paul & White, 1990; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997; Ko et al., 2014).

Such binary understanding of intimacy and gender in friendship has been subjected to further investigation in many studies, the findings of which are complex. Fehr (1995) claimed that boys might also have similar levels of needs and perceptions of having an intimate friendship but they are manifested in a different manner. Zarbatany et al. (2004) studied over 800 Canadian high school and university students and while their findings largely support the common understanding that girls differ from boys in their desire for and pursuit of intimacy from friends, they discovered that the strategies the two sexes adopted in enhancing intimacy and maintaining intimate friendships were different: adolescent boys achieve stronger friendships with their peers when they are engaged in exciting activities of a competitive nature, especially when the competition is evenly matched and they win alternately. Girls, however, might abandon a friendship upon finding that their status and popularity have been undermined by a close friend's achievements. Another study conducted in the Netherlands among over 1000 adolescents also confirms that girls show "higher levels of emotional closeness, commitment and intimacy, and they expect more conventional morality, loyalty and commitment, and empathic understanding from their friends than boys" (Branje et al. 2007, p.601). However, these researchers also found that friendship stability and commitment were highest among middle adolescents and among boys (p.600). Looking at the context of Chinese adolescents, findings on gender differences in school friendships were also diverse and complex. For example, in a study of 406 Taiwanese students studying in mixed-gender and single-sex classrooms, the results show that regardless of gender difference, adolescents strive for closeness through connections with friends and friends' friends (Ko et al., 2015). The findings of this study also show that while girls in mixed-gender classes have the highest tendency to strive for closeness with their classmates, boys in all-boy classes have a higher tendency to strive for closeness than girls in all-girl classes (Ko et al. 2015). All these research findings show that there are differences in the friendship processes between boys and girls. However, the manifestations of these differences are complex and multifaceted.

Friendships in same-sex and co-educational schools

The influences of the gender composition of a school population on adolescents' academic, personal and social development have been discussed by educators and academics (Li & Wong 2018). Barton and Cohen (2004) reported in their study among elementary school pupils that same-sex classrooms increased boys' same-sex friendships. Bigler et al. (2011) argued that same-sex schooling reduced students' opportunities to work together. They also claimed that in both same-sex and co-educational schools, students would choose to spend a considerable amount of time with their same-sex peers and the more time spent with their same-sex peers the more pronounced their gender-typed behaviours would be.

In the Hong Kong context, in a study conducted among 207 university students and 249 secondary school students in Hong Kong (Li & Wong, 2018), it was found that participants who attended single-sex schools were more likely than participants who attended co-educational schools to have same-sex close friends - 79% among participants who attended same-sex schools and 67% among participants who attended co-educational schools (Li & Wong, 2018). However, there was no difference in the time spent with same-sex friends per week or in preference for same-sex friends in gender-neutral activities. The research findings on the impact of same-sex schooling and co-educational schooling on adolescents' friendship developments in different age and cultural contexts informed this study on the friendship experiences of secondary school students who attended same-sex secondary schools in Hong Kong. The questions posed by these findings include whether and how friendships are shaped by same-sex school or classroom settings and whether their specific same-sex or co-educational school environments facilitate adolescents' gender-stereotypical interpersonal expectations and interactions with their friends.

2.3.4 Adolescents' school friendship development and levels of academic abilities

On the significance of school friendships to adolescents' academic and personal development, some studies specifically underscore that the experiences and outcomes of school friendships are interactively related to the academic levels of the adolescents and their school friends. For example, the findings of a study about the emotional and social support of first-year university students who studied in a demanding and competitive psychology programme in Norway suggest that the students benefited emotionally from forming study groups with their academically similar peers and the sense of relatedness they formed with their fellow students helped reduce academic stress (Nordmo & Samara, 2009). A study in the US and China found

that Chinese children and adolescents who befriend high-achieving peers at school show lower levels of peer alienation and aggression (Yang et al, 2014). A longitudinal study on the impact of middle school friendships and academic achievements in early adolescence in the US shows that students with academically engaged friends may achieve at levels higher than expected and well-adjusted friends can positively influence an adolescent's academic development as students may learn to model effective study skills from their high-achieving friends and have easy access to their valuable academic support (Véronneau & Dishion, 2011). Other studies (Crosnoe et al, 2000, 2003) find that adolescents in the US who had friends who liked school and performed well in school had fewer academic problems from modelling their academically able friends and that academically able adolescents are likely to form friendships with schoolmates with similar academic abilities which serve as a common ground and a cause of attraction to one another. The researchers suggest that these situations were particularly obvious in disadvantaged schools regardless of racial differences and conclude that having an academically able schoolmate as a good friend is a source of social capital for an adolescent (Crosnoe et al, 2000, 2003). Another study shows that an adolescent's academic performance is affected by instability of friendship development. Its findings indicate that students show lower academic engagement in the first year in middle school if there is a higher overall level of friendship instability, and that when an adolescent loses a close friend the instrumental and emotional support for staying engaged in school is adversely affected (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). These examples of research studies illustrate the interrelationship between an adolescent's academic abilities and school performance and their friendship development. These insights indicate the need for further studies on the interactional significances between friendships and school academic high achievers.

2.4 Academic high achievers or academically gifted students

The literature in the previous section focuses on the impacts to an adolescent who has an academically able friend. A number of studies in Gifted Education have taken a different perspective to explore the friendship characteristics and needs of the academically gifted themselves. On the database Education Research Complete, 252 and 138 articles were listed following searches for the key phrases “academically gifted” and “academically gifted students” respectively, while only 54 articles were listed when the key phrase “academic high achievers” was searched. Results of searches for academic articles with keywords

“academically gifted students” and “academic high achievers” show a stronger research tradition on the “academically gifted” in comparison with “academic high achievers”. While acknowledging the complexity involved in discussions on whether an academic high achiever is equivalent to an academically gifted student or vice versa, in order to broaden the basis of understanding on the research topic of this study, literature on both the academically gifted and academic high achievers was reviewed and cross-referenced.

2.4.1 Definitions of “giftedness”

Among the many different approaches to defining and categorising giftedness, intelligence quotient testing on a specific range of constructs (Binet, Terman, Wechsler) has long been adopted to identify people of different levels of intelligence. Although the use of IQ has drawn criticisms for its bias and inadequacy (Gould, 1981), it has remained a popular assessment tool. For example, Gross used IQ scores in her differentiation of the moderately gifted from the extremely gifted (Gross, 2004). In Hong Kong, according to official Special Education policy (EDB, 2019), IQ scores are evidence for special education and gifted education provision. Students whose IQ scores fall significantly below the Hong Kong average are placed in special school settings whereas those with exceptionally high IQ scores are eligible for relevant gifted training.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of IQ tests, other mechanisms in identifying giftedness have been developed. A widely adopted approach in Hong Kong to defining giftedness (EDB, Gifted Education, 2019) is Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983, 1999). Based upon the supposition that all people have different kinds of intelligences which may not be fully measured by conventional IQ tests, the Theory of Multiple Intelligence encompasses eight or possibly nine types of intelligences, namely: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematic, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic and existentialist. The Theory of Multiple Intelligence has been subject to critiques for its lack of empirical evidence (Waterhouse, 2006). Defining and identifying giftedness has drawn continuous discussions in gifted education. These topics of discussions demonstrate the complexities and diversities of giftedness. For example, the question of what constitutes a person considered as gifted has led to complex theoretical discussions such as on the differences between “gifts” and “talents” and being gifted in terms of potentials versus being gifted in terms of performance (Sternberg, 1982; Reis, 2004; Gagné, 2009).

In the quest for a better understanding of the definition of giftedness, a general academic conclusion has been reached that there is no single definition of what being gifted means (Gross, 2004; Renzulli, 2005; Missett & McCormick, 2014). However, it is still worth noting that some attempts to conceptualise giftedness have been made. For example, in the federal report on the status of gifted and talented programmes in the United States entitled *National Excellence* (Ross, 1993), gifted and talented children were described as having “outstanding talent performance or show[ing] the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment” (p.26). Renzulli has attempted to provide a simple, practical definition of giftedness as a combination of above-average ability, task fulfilment and creativity (Renzulli, 2005). Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) define giftedness as: “performance that is clearly at the upper end of the distribution in a specific talent domain even relative to other high-functioning individuals in that domain” (Subotnik et al., 2011, p.176). This definition was supported in a publication of the National Association for Gifted Children on gifted education in the US (Missett & McCormick, 2014). Based on these descriptions, arguably whether a student is considered academically gifted can be determined by his/her academic performance in comparison with others in the population. Similar to Missett’s definition of giftedness, Chen et al. (2017) summed up the postulation of various international academics (Baker, 1995; Basirion, Majid & Jelas, 2014; Chan, 2010; Colangelo & Kerr, 1990; Cross, Adams, Dixon, & Holland, 2004; Reis & Boeve, 2009; McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012) and concluded that academically gifted students can be defined as those who have extremely high academic performance in internal or public assessments, for example ranking in the upper 3-5% of their class, scoring above the 95th percentile on SATs, or obtaining all As in public examinations. These working definitions informed the selection criteria of the academic high achievers of this study.

2.4.2 General characteristics of gifted children and young people

A range of literature on giftedness (Smutny, 1998; Porter, 1999; Castillo, 1998; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997; Csikszentihalyi et al. 1997; Clarke, 2002, Gross, 2004) suggests that gifted high-IQ children show certain unique characteristics: They are thought to often show early signs of attention and recognition memory, preference for novelty, precocious physical development, and oral language over-reactivity. They usually learn with minimal instruction and show strong curiosity, persistence, concentration, energy, metacognitive awareness and obsessive interests. The school-related abilities of a gifted child are shown in reading, number, memory and/or abstract logical thinking. Some literature suggests that gifted children typically

play alone and prefer the company of older children. Affectively, gifted children are said to have stronger philosophical and moral concerns, a sense of humour and an experience of awe. They show the capacity for complex attentional structures, curiosity and concentration, emotional autonomy to tolerate the solitude necessary to cultivate their talent, and enjoyment of engaging in activities in which intrinsic and extrinsic rewards motivate them to continue. One interesting finding is that in a study (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997), gifted teenagers reported experiencing a state of “flow”, defined as “a “subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of losing track of time and being unaware of fatigue and of everything else but the activity itself” (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997, p.14). Other characteristics of gifted children and young people include purposefulness, high expectations or perfectionism, intense sensitivity, perceptiveness, empathy and moral idealism. These unique characteristics of gifted children and young people may have both positive and negative impacts on their upbringing, social development and interactions with others in school and in adulthood (Winner, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997; Gross, 2004; Silverman, 2007; Yuen & Fong, 2014; Chan, 2010; Maksic & Iwasaki, 2009; Missett, & McCormick, 2014; Gojkovic et al., 2019; Walker & Shore, 2011).

2.4.3 A generally positive profile of gifted children’s and young people’s emotional wellbeing and social development

In contrast with the view that gifted children and young people are prone to emotional or social difficulties (Gross, 2004), many researchers have instead come to a conclusion that gifted children and young people have either better or at least similar personal and social development to their non-gifted peers. Nearly a century ago, Terman (1926) disputed the belief that gifted individuals are unhealthy and socially inept and concluded that high IQ students show no significant deficits in personal or social development. He found that high IQ students are usually socially well-adjusted and do better in school. Similarly, other research findings show that many gifted students have fewer emotional problems and are more successful in friendship development. Their positive personal and peer experiences may be attributed to their high emotional intelligences, more advanced social skills and stronger empathy (Rowlands, 1974; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Freeman, 1979; Leyden, 1985; Kaiser & Berndt, 1985; Ferrando, 2006; Neilhart & Wang, 2015; Prieto & Ferrando, 2009). Similarly, Baker found that there is no significant difference in the level, severity or nature of distress experienced between gifted and non-gifted individuals and that the rate of depression and suicidal ideation among academically gifted adolescents is similar to that of their non-gifted peers (Baker, 1995). Godor

& Szymanski studied the PISA 2012 findings and concluded that academically gifted students have a similar or higher sense of belonging to school and a similar or lower level of loneliness than their non-gifted peers (Godor & Szymanski, 2017). The generally positive qualities of gifted adolescents' emotional intelligence and social skills identified in these studies suggest that gifted adolescents are better at making friends and have more positive friendship experiences than their non-gifted peers. These findings form an insightful background for this study to explore further the personal experiences of school friendship of the academically gifted adolescents in Hong Kong. The existing literature informed this research study as it prompted questions about whether Hong Kong academic high achievers shared the positive characteristics as described in the existing literature and whether these gifted students' friendship experiences were in fact influenced by other crucial factors which may or may not be related to their gifted characteristics.

Although the research findings above present a generally positive portrayal of the emotional wellbeing of gifted children and young people, there are also research findings indicating more complex and discrepant conclusions. Although a number of quantitative studies on gifted students' life satisfaction and emotional wellbeing (Ash & Huebner, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997; Freeman, 1979; Leyden, 1985; Kaiser & Berndt, 1985; Ferrando, 2006; Neilhart, 2015; Prieto & Ferrando, 2009, Lee et al. 2012, Godor & Szymanski, 2017) suggest that gifted students do not have significantly less desirable experiences when compared to their non-gifted peers, in Ash & Huebner's study, while gifted adolescents had higher scores of satisfaction in most domains such as family, school, self, living environment and global, their satisfaction score on friends was lower than that of their non-gifted peers. Moreover, some personal accounts solicited through qualitative studies show uniquely negative friendship experiences of some extremely gifted young people and also suggest gifted adolescents had more negative friendship experiences than their non-gifted peers. Prieto and Ferrando pointed out a discrepancy in the research findings that "research studies show a mostly positive picture of gifted children, but the reports based on experience are more negative." (Prieto & Ferrando, 2009, p.150). This statement is supported in the data of Gross's qualitative study of exceptionally gifted students in which many of the participants gave personal accounts of loneliness and desperation in their school lives, in which their social development with peers had been one of the major difficulties (Gross, 2004; Morris, 2013; Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000). Chan's study also shows mixed results on the impact of perfectionism among academically gifted Hong Kong secondary school students: that they may exhibit positive and/ or negative

features of either healthy or unhealthy perfectionism, or both (Chan, 2010). As Gross suggested (2004), academically high achievers' perfectionism might also have an impact on their friendship expectations and experiences.

Corresponding to these complex and mixed findings, instead of seeing all gifted individuals as one homogenous group with a similar set of personal qualities and traits, several studies find that within the broad group of the gifted, the contextual factors and individual differences, either personal or social, which gifted individuals are subject to can strongly influence their friendship development. For example, it is found that there are gender differences, with gifted boys being less troubled in their friendship experiences and less likely to report feelings of loneliness than girls (Moon, 2004). The area of giftedness is another indicator of the likelihood that a young person will experience social problems; for example, students who are gifted in mathematics are found to have fewer social or friendship problems than the verbally gifted (Cross, Neumeister, & Cassady, 2007). Extremely gifted individuals with an IQ over 155 tend to show more problems in friendship and social interaction than the moderately gifted with IQs within the range of 125-155 (Gross, 2004; Hollingworth, 1924).

The experiences of gifted children and adolescents presented in the existing literature show that the social and friendship developments of gifted children and adolescents are diverse and may not fit into a uniform pattern either in terms of the comparisons between different individuals or within the same individual at different stages of life or in different social settings. Their problems can either be seen as characteristically shared only among the gifted or as common personal and social issues indiscriminately shared but in varied degrees of intensity by all people (Leyden, 1985). These research findings create a research opportunity on the commonalities and differences in friendship experiences among extremely gifted students and between extremely gifted students and their moderately gifted or non-gifted peers. Although the current research project might not allow such a refined focus of inquiry, such nuanced topics about gifted students' individual friendship experiences informed the current research study and may well be one of the follow-up research focuses in future.

2.4.4 Hong Kong gifted students' personal and emotional developments

As mentioned above, contextual factors play a significant role in gifted students' development. It is therefore important to note that the personal, social and intellectual developments of the gifted students in Hong Kong are also influenced by their specific Hong Kong context. In the last two decades, in tandem with education reforms and an increase in awareness of students'

mental health, the wellbeing of gifted students in Hong Kong has become a growing academic interest among Hong Kong educators. Much of the research conducted in this area has taken a quantitative approach. For example, Chan (2002) studied 116 gifted students in Hong Kong and concluded that in general these students' giftedness affected their self-worth and self-concept. Their self-concept had a strong adverse effect on their social acceptance and friendship (Chan, 2002). Another study by Chan on gifted students in Hong Kong in 2008 shows that among the 498 gifted students studied, "supersmart" students - defined as students who obtained the highest mean scores in all three of the Multiple Intelligences Profile, Emotional Intelligence Scale and Successful Intelligence Questionnaire – reported a higher and wider ranging level of engagement in activities related to leadership and creativity than other students, while modestly gifted students reported the least engagement. However, in a survey of teachers' perceptions about these students, their teachers were found to perceive "supersmart" students as less emotionally mature, less concerned about others, and more likely to have behavioural conduct problems than socio-emotionally gifted students (Chan, 2008). These research findings show that similar to their counterparts in other countries, as discussed in the preceding section, gifted students in Hong Kong have personal and environmental characteristics which are influenced by their level and area of giftedness.

In a study of academically gifted students in southern China including Hong Kong, Chen et al. claimed that positive affect, agency hope, parents' trust, general health, and social functioning contribute to well-being, while alienation from peers, depression and anxiety were found to be negatively related to the life satisfaction of the academically gifted (Chen et al., 2017). The researchers also highlight that academically gifted students in China are subject to a unique collectivist and Confucian cultural context which has an impact on their attitude towards academic success and towards their academic peers (Chen et al., 2017). Resonating with Chen's observations of academically gifted students' perceptions of school performance and interactions in Hong Kong and southern China, Yuen and Fong (2013) conducted a review on gifted students in East Asia based on Ziegler's Actiotope Model of Giftedness. The findings show that gifted students in Hong Kong exhibit behaviour of denying their talents or avoiding challenging situations in order to gain recognition from their peers, resonating with the Social Learning Theory and the social coping behaviour suggested by Cross & Frazier (2009). The researchers highlighted the importance of feeling connected to school and suggested that when gifted students feel that they are valued members of the school community and they receive constructive feedback and encouragement in school, they are more confident in developing

their competencies and in taking risks (Yuen and Fong, 2013). In their follow-up study on factors influencing Hong Kong adolescents' school connectedness, factors such as peer relations, broader school relationship and opportunities for talent development were highlighted (Yuen et al. 2012).

2.4.5 Friendship of academic high achievers

Based on the general conclusion that academically gifted children's and young people's social and school experiences are influenced by their personal qualities and contexts, it is reasonable to assume that academic high achievers in this research who excelled in academic assessment and therefore fall into the academically gifted category may also experience friendship differently from their non high achieving peers in school. This assumption was studied by Palacios et al. (2019) in their research on friendship networks in high-ability, mixed-ability and low-ability classrooms. Their findings suggest that high-achieving students prefer having high-achieving peers as their academic partners and they tend to avoid making friends or having academic partnerships with deviant peers. It was also found that academic interactions lead to friendships and vice versa in classrooms of all levels of ability (Palacios et al., 2019). Studies on western and Chinese school-aged students concluded that adolescents choose to make friends with peers of similar academic ability, and highly engaged and high-achieving students tend to befriend students who are similarly academically oriented (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018; Liu & Chen, 2003). These findings further support the nuances in friendship experiences of academic high achievers and informed the choice of the focus of this research.

2.4.6 Impact of ability grouping on academic high achievers' school experiences

One popular topic of research on the academically gifted and academic high achievers is related to acceleration and ability grouping. Several studies of academically gifted students' developments have been conducted in certain special gifted educational settings – for example, summer camps for the gifted or special accelerated classes for a specific subject area. A mainstream conclusion drawn from these studies points towards the assertion that academically gifted individuals will have better peer and friendship experiences when they are with people of a similar level of giftedness (Csikszentimihalyi et al., 1997; Gross, 2004; Missett & McCormick, 2014, Colangelo & Assouline, 2009). For example, disputing a common belief that gifted students prefer to work on their own, French and Shore found that academically gifted students in fact prefer working collaboratively when they are grouped with students of similar giftedness. Academically gifted students also show high self-concept and better social

and emotional wellbeing when learning with peers of similar ability (French & Shore, 2009; Banfield, 2005). These existing studies provide insights into discussions on whether and how academic high achievers experience friendships differently when they learn and interact with their peers in mixed ability and high ability settings. They are of particular relevance to the Hong Kong context and to the participants in this research since most schools in Hong Kong operate within a banding system and use a subject allocation mechanism in senior forms based on students' abilities and performance.

2.5 Teachers as significant others for students in social development

Although most students may not regard their teachers as friends, many studies have found that teachers have a crucial role in students' academic, personal and social development. Apart from providing academic input, it is a general belief that teachers have an influential role in facilitating students' friendship development with their peers. Serdiouk et al. suggest that teachers' warmth and positive support, respect, responsiveness and support for autonomy encourage inter-racial friendships among classmates of ethnically diverse classrooms. They find that as teachers are "the driving force of classroom social processes, they may be able to mitigate children's same-ethnic biases and promote cross-ethnic friendliness" (Serdiouk et al. 2016, p.42). The researchers assert that teachers serve as role models for students for acceptable social behaviour, and guide and respond to students' social interactions and needs. If teachers respond to students in a supportive manner, students will gain greater confidence in developing positive social interactions among their schoolmates (Serdiouk et al. 2016). Another study of multi-ethnic classrooms in the US also suggests that teachers' different treatment of students with different levels of academic achievement can create different impacts on students' engagement in cross-race friendships (Atkins et al., 2017). In classrooms with academic hierarchies and in which teachers treat students differently based on their levels of academic achievement, black students were more likely to form friendships with white students (Atkins et al. 2017, p.198). In a qualitative study of how teachers assisted students with special needs to develop friendships at school, researchers find that strategies such as finding opportunities, providing interpretations and making accommodations adopted by teachers could encourage student friendships in an inclusive classroom (Turnbull et al. 2000). In a literature review on promoting friendship development in inclusive classrooms (Krone & Yu, 2019), researchers sum up a number of studies (Buysse, 1993; Buysse et al., 2003; Chang

et al., 2016; Dietrich, 2005; Frea et al., 1999; Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009) and conclude that the strategies adopted by teachers in promoting friendships among classmates include providing opportunities for dyadic interactions through intentionally pairing specific students together, placing students in a classroom setting where they are less likely to be in conflict, and giving choices to students with disabilities so they can be near or sit by a friend. In the Hong Kong context, gifted students reported that their sense of belonging to school was largely hinged on their interactions with other students and their teachers, and researchers highlighted the needs for more attention to the role teachers play in gifted students' emotional and social wellbeing (Yuen & Fong, 2013). While the predominant focus of this research was on the interactions of the academic high achievers with their schoolmates in their school environment, these consistent and perhaps unexpected findings emerged from participants' narratives on the crucial impact of teachers as facilitators of academic high achievers' school friendships opened up the perimeter of discussions and demonstrated the interconnectedness of all players in a school setting in shaping students' experiences.

2.6 Friendship experiences of students in an inclusive school setting

In a mainstream school where inclusive education is implemented, students interact with a wide range of schoolmates with different characteristics in and out of the classroom every day. How their own, or their schoolmates', special educational needs influence the friendship experiences of high academic achievers is an emerging academic topic on students with "twice-exceptionalities", that is students with giftedness and special educational needs. Literature on students with both giftedness and SEN (Missett & McCormick, 2014; Montgomery, 2009; Winner, 1996) suggests that gifted students with SEN demonstrate unique intellectual, personality and social developments different from non-SEN gifted students. For instance, in contrast with the general belief that gifted people have stronger empathy and sensitivity to others' emotions, the stereotypical although debatable characteristic of a lack of empathy related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may affect the peer and friendship development of gifted individuals with ASD (Montgomery, 2009). In particular, studies on the social and friendship developments of students with ASD have attracted increasing attention from special education educators, possibly due to the general belief that students with ASD tend to have less favourable social and friendship experiences. For example, Cook et al. interviewed 11 middle school male students with ASD in South-east England about their experiences of friendship

and bullying in mainstream schools. They found that one of the crucial factors for students with ASD to cope with bullying and undesirable inter-personal encounters at school is the presence of supportive friends (Cook et al., 2016). Rossetti (2011) reported that friendships between a student with ASD and one without require complex and conscious recognition and negotiation of specific difficulties with social interactions including figuring out how to interact together, supporting each other during interactions, and planning to spend time together. Although it is more often the student without ASD who will exercise more of the negotiating measures, in a friendship between a student with ASD and one without these natural supports are provided in a subtle and practical manner during the flow of social interactions (Rossetti, 2011). In a study to explore how students without SEN perceive friendships with students with SEN, it has been found that the grade level of the students affects their level of friendship expectations towards a friend with SEN (Han & Chadsey, 2004). This study shows that friendship expectations toward peers with severe disabilities are not influenced by gender, but by grade level: most Grade 6 to grade 8 students engage in sports, video games, talking, hanging out, visiting and inviting friends, club activities and on-line chatting with their friends who had mild forms of disabilities, while talking is the main activity in a friendship between a student who has severe disabilities and one who does not. Compared to the younger students, older students have higher expectations on intimacy, loyalty and support from their friends with disabilities (p.211). Academically gifted students with disabilities or SEN are known as twice-exceptional students in Hong Kong. Some of the academic high achievers who took part in this study happened to possess similar dual special needs characteristics of academically giftedness and SEN. It was inevitable, and perhaps influential, that these participants' experiences of having SEN or disabilities, although not the focus of this research project, enriched our understanding of their school friendship experiences.

2.7 Extra-curricular activities among adolescents

As mentioned above, boys tend to strengthen their friendships through shared activities. Some studies on extra-curricular activities in school and outside school show that extra-curricular activities have links to adolescents' peer group formation and identity as they provide a platform for getting connected to a set of peers who share similar experiences and goals (Eckert, 1989; Eccles, 2003). In the Hong Kong context, a study on the most preferred leisure activities among Hong Kong adolescents in 10 local secondary schools of various bandings shows that

boys prefer sports-related extra-curricular activities while girls mainly choose similarly between sports, performance and media related extra-curricular activities. It also shows an interesting result that while sports are in general most popular among boys in all schools, the number of male students taking part in performance-related activities such as playing a musical instrument is relatively higher in band one schools than among boys in schools of lower bandings (Sivan et al. 2008). The researchers attributed this finding to the possibility that music-related pursuits usually require more financial resources and are believed to benefit students when applying for secondary school places at top schools in Hong Kong. While these explanations may need further investigation, the research findings provide insights into the links between friendship and the extra-curricular activities of adolescents in the Hong Kong context, especially of those studying in top band one schools.

Digital gaming and online social media use are arguably two of the popular, if not essential, leisure activities among many of today's adolescents. Many studies have been conducted on the impacts of online gaming and social networking on adolescents' social development. A study in Sweden found that although a majority of adolescents and young adults do spend a considerable amount of time engaging in digital gaming, with 72 % of them playing these games and 15-20% of them playing more than 3 hours a day (Eklund & Roman, 2018), digital gaming does not lead to new friendships among these young people, but they feel that these activities could create a sense of community with their online friends in the virtual world as well as with their schoolmates as they could talk about their exciting personal gaming experiences at school (Eklund & Roman, 2018). In another study conducted by the same researchers, young people in Sweden who played online games were found to be 1.5 times more likely to make friends later on, and this was attributed to the forming of a shared identity encouraging online and offline friendships (Eklund & Roman, 2017).

In Hong Kong using digital platforms for gaming and social networking is equally prevalent. A survey conducted by the HKSAR Department of Health (2014) shows that 20% of primary and secondary school students spent more than 3 hours a day on the Internet. However, in contrast with the positive results in the Swedish findings, 37% of the Hong Kong teenagers said that they always or occasionally gave up outdoor activities, had less sleep and had to lie to their parents, friends and teachers about the time spent going online, and it was suggested that such situations would affect teenagers' interactions with friends in real life (Department of Health, press release, 8 July 2014). A study conducted to investigate the quality of online

and offline friends among Hong Kong people shows that their offline friendships were higher in quality than their online friendships, involving a higher degree of breadth, depth, commitment and understanding. Such differences only diminish if the friendship lasted over a year. Same-sex offline friendships were rated higher in quality than offline cross-sex friendships or online same-sex or cross-sex friendships (Chan & Cheng, 2004). Nonetheless, a study on the impacts of online interactive gaming on Hong Kong school-aged young people's social development suggests that teenage friendships can be formed while playing interactive group online games and playing online interactive group games does not reduce a person's social activities and friendship in real life (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013). Apart from digital gaming, social networking is no doubt another very common form of leisure activity among adolescents across the world nowadays. A literature review on existing studies into the impacts of social networking on adolescents' wellbeing (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014) suggests that while problems caused by engaging in social networking (for example, cyber bullying, social comparison, internet addiction, or disturbance to sleep, to academic performance and to parent-child relationships) pose harmful impacts on adolescents, social networking also provides chances for enhanced peer relationships, broadened opportunities to affiliate, including with groups that are less accessible within traditional social contexts, and increased occasions for self-disclosure with both their online virtual friends whom adolescents do not meet in person and their real-life friends whom they may see every day at school or in their proximity. The researchers also challenged the reduction hypothesis and stated that online friendship does not necessarily reduce the time spent on cultivating friendships in real life. As talking about interests or personal matters is a form of strategy in developing friendship, the use of online social media for this purpose may also have a significant role in the friendship experiences of the academic high achievers in Hong Kong schools.

2.8 Filling the research gap and addressing discrepancies in existing academic discussions

As mentioned above, friendship is almost universally regarded as an important part of human experience. While the abundance of academic literature has enriched our understanding of friendship, the findings from existing research have led to calls for further and more in-depth exploration of the complexities and contextualities of friendship development. Rubin et al. suggest that although a wealth of literature confirms that friendship is vital in the lives of children and teenagers, their needs and experiences of friendship are "far more complex than

typically portrayed in the peer relationship literature” (Rubin et al, 2008, p.3). Such calls for exploring the complexities of friendship needs and experiences, particularly of the academically gifted, is echoed by Mönks (1993), Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1997), Gross (2004), Winner (1996) and Misset & McCormick (2014) who similarly point out the need to address the gaps in friendship studies on academically gifted adolescents, such a gap in friendship studies also seem to exist in the Hong Kong academic discussions. The research topic of this study: friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools is an effort to address the gaps and discrepancies in existing friendship studies on academically high achievers.

Since the research topic of this project involved three broad areas of education studies namely: friendship, academic high achievers and the Hong Kong school context, the literature review was conducted selectively with the aim of forming a general and fundamental understanding of these vast and complex academic areas while highlighting the nuanced complex and multiple nature of these discussions. The literature on the defining key terms such as adolescent friendship and academic high achievers shows that it is difficult to have single and straightforward definitions of these terms. However, with reference to the seminal works and recent literature, certain common characteristics of adolescent friendship and academic gifted students informed the draw-up of working definitions for this research. With reference to the existing literature, in particular, the participant selection criteria based on the performance-based percentage comparison with the peer group was set. While a general positive profile of academically gifted students’ emotional and social well-being was formed in the literature review, individual differences and discrepancies found in existing adolescent friendship studies present a gap for further research on the contextuality and multiplicity of academically gifted students’ school friendship experiences.

2.9 Research topic and research questions

The research topic of this study is on the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. Informed by existing literature and based on my specific academic interests, the research question of this study is: how did academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools experience friendship? Under this research question, there are three sub-questions: (1) What were the friendship needs of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools and how were these needs met in their school experiences? (2) What

processes were involved in the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools? and (3) How were the high achiever characteristics of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools influenced by their friendship experiences, or vice versa?

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study adopted narrative inquiry as the methodology. This chapter first explains the paradigmatic assumptions undertaken in this research. This is followed by a literature review on narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in qualitative research, and the rationale for adopting narrative inquiry corresponding to the paradigmatic assumptions. In the later part of this chapter, the use of semi-structured interview methods and thematic analysis, the procedures adopted in the study, and issues on research ethics and trustworthiness are explained.

3.1 Theoretical assumptions

This research situated itself in an interpretivist paradigm which encompasses the worldview that knowledge, meaning and reality are complex, contextual and subjective (Creswell, 2007). Interpretivists believe that research should be observed from inside through the direct experiences of people and the focus of research is to seek to understand rather than explain (Mack, 2010). Hammersley advocated that we can only understand why people do what they do and behave in characteristic ways by knowing more about how those involved interpret and make sense of their world: in other words by understanding the unique and personal nature of their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and so on (Hammersley, 2012). In order to acquire such understanding, this research aimed to get close to the participants, and through collaboration between the researcher and the participants in an in-depth and personal approach, the researcher hoped to become “the insider” (Creswell, 2007) in the exploration and to gain personal access into the participants’ complex experiences. To achieve this aim in the exploration of the research topic of this study, narrative inquiry was adopted as the guiding methodology of this study. The research topic of this project was the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. Although the participants in this research were broadly categorized into a homogenous group, these participants were unique in their personal and contextual settings which gave rise to their varied experiences and perspectives on friendships and social interactions in school. As Mack (2010) suggested, the ontological assumptions of interpretivism are that social reality is seen by multiple people and these multiple people interpret events differently leaving multiple perspectives of an incident. With the adoption of an interpretivist theoretical position, using semi-structured interviews to solicit

personal narratives on school friendships from different participants was deemed theoretically consistent.

3.1.1 Defining Narrative Inquiry

As narrative inquiry is adopted by different researchers from various backgrounds and for different purposes, a wide variety of working definitions are employed by narrative inquiry researchers in different settings. Such multiple and contextualised adoption of narrative inquiry makes defining its meaning(s) difficult. Riessman recognised the “absence of single meaning” (2008, p.6) when trying to impose a clear and fixed definition of the terms “narrative” and “narrative inquiry” in social science research. This claim was supported by Kramp (2004) who said that there are few preformed protocols to clearly define what narrative inquiry encompasses. Having said that, theorists have tried to provide clearer frameworks to conceptualise narrative inquiry by defining narrative as “stories” (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Creswell, 2007; Kramp, 2004; Josselson, 1993; Elliott, 2005). For instance, Polkinghorne supported the general understanding that the term “narrative” refers to “any spoken or written presentation” and specified the definition of “narrative” to such presentations “in story form”. He agreed that narrative is a primary form of meaningful presentation of human experience. Since narrative meaning is not an object to be observed, it can only be known and observed (by the person him/herself or others) through individual stories and histories (Polkinghorne, 1988). In addition, Kramp highlighted that a story has a particular context, which encompasses time and place, and the storyteller uses the context “to connect and situate particular experiences so they cohere and structure life as experienced” (Kramp, p.105).

3.1.2 Merits of Narrative Inquiry

Pinnegar & Daynes (2007) pointed out that narrative inquiry signifies four turns in knowledge generation: 1. The relationship between the researcher and the researched is changed such that both parties will learn and change in their encounter; 2. It is a shift from numbers to words as data and this is a recognition of the limitations of using numbers in capturing the complexities and contextualities in human experiences; 3. It is a move from generalisability such that the particular experience in a particular setting involving particular people is valued; and 4. Its turn towards particular individual experiences shows an acceptance of multiple ways of knowing the world (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). While admitting that narrative inquiry bears weaknesses

in face of the dominance of positivist academic traditions, the writers underscored the distinctive merits of narrative inquiry. They asserted that when words become the focus of exploration and these words connote the particularity and multiplicity of people's experiences instead of generalised knowing, personal narratives as data enrich our exploration of meaning since one way of knowing of the world is replaced by multiple ways of knowing and understanding. When narratives are collected directly from participants in their own environment and at their own discretion, participants are allowed to present their subjective lived experiences in their own ways (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). These characteristics of narrative inquiry fit well with the multiplicity and subjectivity encompassed in the interpretivist paradigm.

3.1.3 Interviews in Narrative Inquiry

Riessman (1993) stated that interviews are widely used for data collection in the human sciences. She suggested that "the goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements" (p. 21). Similarly, DeMarrais (2004) elaborated that in qualitative interviews, "researchers learn from participants through long, focused conversations" (p.52) for soliciting in-depth descriptions from participants about their experiences. The goal, as DeMarrais suggested, is to construct as complete a picture about the person's view of an experience or phenomenon as possible from the words and experiences of the participant. Riessman (1993) suggested using less specified questions to solicit narratives as she pointed out that narrative analytic induction "by definition, causes questions to change and new ones to emerge" (p.60), and she thought using simple, open questions and giving up the control of a fixed interview format can facilitate active participation of the participants (Riessman, 1993).

3.1.4 Thematic Approach to Narrative Inquiry

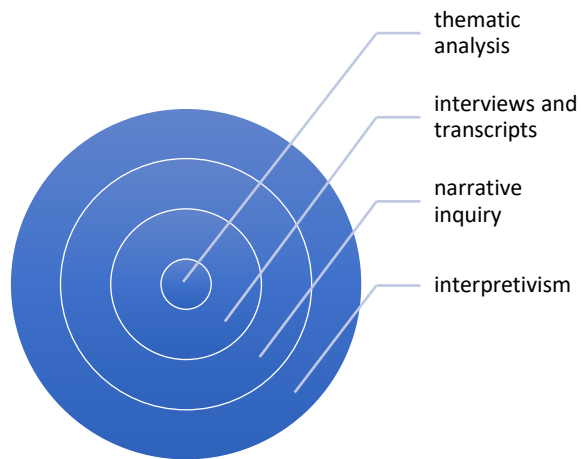
While narrative inquiry was the governing theoretical framework that informed the overall data collection and analysis process of this research project, thematic analysis was selected to be the tool to process and display the findings. Resonating with the ideas of Polkinghorne (1988) and Clandinin & Connelly (2000) about the presence of themes in narrative, thematic analysis is widely adopted as a tool of narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008). Acknowledging the diverse approaches of thematic analysis, Riessman cautioned that there are no hard and fast rules for researchers to follow. However, she stressed that thematic analysis focuses on the content, that is "what" is said in the narrative (2008, p.53), instead of why or how something is said. This

approach resonates with the semantic focus of the version of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), by which coding and theme development reflect the explicit content of the data. As a flexible data analysis method, a thematic analysis approach has been adopted in narrative inquiry in many research projects. Examples of flexible adoption of thematic analysis, such as the four exemplars in Riessman's book (2008), are many.

Focusing on the content, instead of attending to language, form or interaction, thematic analysts theorize across many narratives so as to identify common themes across research participants' experiences of the events they report and the actions they take (Riessman, 2008). Riessman also compared thematic analysis with a grounded theory approach to narrative analysis. She proposed that thematic analysis, although inductive in nature, is guided by prior theory, and thematic analysts aim to preserve the sequences and the intactness of the story, whereas researchers adopting a grounded theory approach tend to code narrative data into various segments (sometimes even word-by-word) in a decontextualized generic manner (Riessman, 2008). In the end of her introduction of thematic analysis, Riessman reminded novice researchers that one of the limitations of thematic analysis is that when presented with thematic groups, readers would have the assumption that everyone being put into the same thematic cluster means the same thing by what they say. Such an assumption leads to "obscuring particularities of meaning-in-context" (p.76). With reference to Riessman's propositions, thematic analysis was considered to be a suitable analytical tool instead of more inductive comparative methods like grounded theory for this research topic as the studies of adolescents' friendships and gifted students' educational needs have been relatively well-established academic areas of discussions which have yielded valuable and diverse insights and knowledge for further inquiry in relevant areas. To a certain extent, the themes developed through the data analysis in this project were informed by prior theories in friendship studies in a critical manner. To mediate the limitation mentioned by Riessman, while the findings were by and large organised under over-arching themes, the interpretivist spirit of preserving the significant but unique and sometimes discrepant findings of individual participants' narratives went in tandem. They were reported under the same over-arching themes or were presented as separate themes. In some cases, thematic deduction and inductive exploration led to the organisation of broad themes suffixed with a number of either converging or diverging subthemes in the report of findings. These organisation approaches inevitably created challenges in organising and displaying the findings but this was deemed meaningful in narrative inquiry which stresses the multiplicity in human experiences.

While thematic analysis has been adopted in different ways by different researchers, this study broadly followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). Braun & Clarke (2006) explained that their approach to thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within texts. They advocated that thematic analysis is a flexible research tool which can provide a rich, detailed and complex study of the narratives well-suited to the subjective and complex nature of human enquiry on less explored topics. They stressed its inductive nature to narrative inquiry as it places significance on the narrative being coded without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame. Thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and the researchers have to make a series of choices actively during the process. The importance of reflexivity is therefore highlighted in the analytic process. Analysts have to keep asking about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Braun & Clarke alerted researchers that instead of claiming that themes emerge in the data, they should recognise that themes are in fact generated through the researchers' active process of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2018). Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis involves six phases: 1. Familiarising yourself with the data and identifying items of potential interest; 2. Generating codes; 3. Generating initial themes; 4. Reviewing initial themes; 5. Defining and naming themes and 6. Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this research project aimed at exploring the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools, in order to address the contextual and subjective nature of this research topic, a qualitative study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with individual participants broadly informed by the conceptual framework of narrative inquiry was adopted. Data were interpreted in a thematic approach broadly based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). The figure below shows the interconnection of interpretivism, narrative inquiry, interviews and thematic analysis constituting the research methodology of this research study.

Figure 3.1.4 Interconnection of interpretivism, narrative inquiry, interviews and thematic analysis in this research study



After a general review of the theoretical conceptualisations on narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the following section explains the rationale on how narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis appropriately respond to the characteristics of this research study.

3.1.5 Rationale for adopting Narrative Inquiry

While acknowledging the diverse interpretations and applications of narrative inquiry in academic research, this research adopted narrative inquiry approach in a broad and flexible sense to explore the unique and complex experiences of the research participants through their own personal narratives in their own voices. Resonating with the four turns of narrative inquiry suggested by Pinnegar & Daynes (2007): from the general towards particular individual human experiences, from the use of numbers to words as data, towards a changed power relationship between the researcher and the researched, and towards multiple understandings of knowledge, Elliott advocated a narrative approach as a suitable research method when the narratives in respondents' accounts are focused upon in order to explore "an interest in people's lived experiences; a desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research and an awareness that the researcher him- or herself is also a narrator" (Elliott, 2005 p.6). Elliot's assertions echo the rationale for adopting narrative inquiry in this research study.

An interest in people's lived experiences

High academic achievers in Hong Kong may be seen as the winners in the Hong Kong education system where academic achievements are considered a major factor in the measurement of one's success and one's identity. While people pay most of their attention to

these students' academic successes and recognising them by their high exam scores, these young people's personal, emotional and social lives and needs as a person may have been overlooked. Moreover, from an overall review of the literature and research projects conducted by academics of major research institutes in Hong Kong on Hong Kong academic high achievers' experiences, it appears that positivist statistical or numerical studies seem to be the main form of research tradition whereas in-depth personal studies of individual participants are rather limited. An example was that among 14 research articles published by the Hong Kong Academy of the Gifted and talented, only one piece of research was a qualitative study while the rest of them were mainly survey analysis with little or no element of qualitative data from individual participants (<https://www.hkage.org.hk/en/research/research-projects>). In view of this, this research project adopted narrative inquiry by which participants were invited to tell their own life stories, offered an opportunity for researchers and readers to gain deeper insights into the complex and multi-faceted lives of these participants which were overlooked or could not be presented in detail in quantitative studies.

A desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to determining what are the most salient themes in an area of research

This research aimed to explore the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. Adopting semi-structured interviews to solicit participants' narratives in their own words allows freedom for participants to decide what to say in the interviews and how they choose to describe their experiences. This can be seen as a gesture of allowing the participants to make their voices heard, respecting and empowering them and acknowledging that the participants themselves know best about themselves. Moreover, as the participants' personal perspectives on the issue of school friendships might be different from the pre-assumptions that outsiders might have, adopting narrative inquiry helped to mediate the researcher's subjective pre-assumptions prior to the study.

An awareness of the researcher also being a narrator

When a researcher chooses to study an area but not others, such a choice is made out of the researcher's subjective preference and curiosity. Such choice of research involves the researcher's "passion, caring, or insight connected in a nonneutral way to what is being studied" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007. p.29). In this study, although my prior subjective experiences might pose a bias on the studies, my dual role as being the former teacher of some of the participants and as a researcher in the research project also facilitated co-construction of

meanings. As a witness of these participants' lived experiences in their school setting, I shared similar contextual experiences with the participants, and my knowledge, passion and curiosity enriched the interpretation of the stories told by the participants. My reflexive interactions with the participants' engagement in this study when the interviews were conducted and when the data were interpreted facilitated a multi-perspective exploration of knowledge.

3.2 Methods

In this section, methods of inquiry concerning the participants, the semi-structured interviews, processing and analysis of interview data, ethical considerations and trustworthiness are introduced and discussed.

3.2.1 Participants

Participant selection criteria

Ten participants were invited to take part in this project based on several inclusion criteria (see Table 3.2.1a)

Table 3.2.1a: Participant selection criteria

	Criteria	Operationalisation	Rationale
1.	Possessing characteristics of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary school settings	The participant obtained at least 36 points out of the maximum of 42 in 6 HKDSE subjects	Such results put them into the top 0.2% in a candidate population of around 40,000 to 60,000 candidates in the past 6 years (HKDSE 2012-2018 Results Statistics).
2.	Having completed secondary school education	The participant completed six years of secondary school education leading to the HKDSE examination.	This was to acknowledge the complex uniqueness of individual experiences. Early adolescents may have needs different from late

			<p>adolescents due to their personal and educational development at different stages. Or one participant might have eventful experiences during the examination driven final year and after their exit exam results were released. Participants could choose to depict a particularly significant event as the focus of their narratives.</p>
3.	Being over the age of 18	<p>The participant's 18th birthday fell on or before the first day of his or her participation in the research. To ensure that this was the case, only students who had completed their first year of undergraduate study were invited to participate.</p>	<p>Being adults over 18, the participants were expected to be more emotionally mature to make autonomous decisions on what to say and how to cooperate with the researcher, as compared to students under 18. Having adults as participants was expected to ensure a power balance between the researcher and the researched.</p>
4.	Having studied in a mainstream Hong Kong secondary school.	<p>The participant studied in a government funded or direct subsidy scheme</p>	<p>As stated in the introduction, most students in Hong Kong</p>

		Hong Kong secondary school.	study in either government funded or direct subsidy schools in which teaching and learning are operated in a similar manner and subject to similar school culture.
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Further explanations on the selection criteria

1. The participants should possess characteristics of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary school settings. To determine whether these participants had these characteristics, an objective standard of their exam results of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education was adopted. All participants obtained at least 36 points out of the maximum of 42 in 6 subjects (7 points being the highest for each subject). Such results put them into the top 0.2% in a candidate population of around 40,000 to 60,000 candidates in the past 6 years (HKDSE 2012-2018 Results Statistics). 2. They have completed secondary school education and are at least over the age of 18; and 3. They have studied in a mainstream Hong Kong secondary school.

Following the general definition of giftedness suggested by Misset & McCormick (2014) and Chen et al (2017), this project set the recruitment criterion of academically high achieving participants based on their public examination performance in comparison with others in territory-wide standard assessments, that is the participants' HKDSE exam results in terms of total scores of all six exam subjects. This clear and relatively more objective criterion was chosen over other possible determinants such as self-identification or internal exam or talent-specific achievements of individual students as a relatively objective mechanism to illustrate and measure the academic achievements of these participants. Scores and rankings have long been adopted in the Hong Kong school system to reflect individual students' performance and for promotion to further education. Because of this familiar and well-established practice, the potential participants for this research project would find the selection criterion based on their HKDSE results easier to understand than other more diverse descriptors of what constitutes an academic high achiever. For example, students in different schools and different classes may study different exam subjects. Some only choose to study languages and humanities and some

study sciences. Due to ability grouping, the ranking of each student based on his or her internal exam assessments in class does not necessarily clearly show the student's level of achievements in comparison with the entire student population. These individual differences encompassed in internal academic assessments administered among different classes and in different schools would pose challenges to participant recruitment. Furthermore, when the research project was in the initial stage of recruitment, it was assumed that some participants would be recruited in other schools through approaching teachers in those schools or by referring to the schools' public announcements of outstanding HKDSE results of their graduates on their school websites. Adopting HKDSE results as the recruitment criterion was thus deemed to serve as a practical and effective means of measuring high academic achievement.

Moreover, choosing participants who are over 18 years of age was suitable for this research question as on the one hand having adult participants possibly reduced the moral and technical problems of conducting in-depth personal research with vulnerable subjects since these adults have lived through their entire secondary school life and should have acquired the intellectual and personal maturity to make informed choices and to engage in a research project in which they were expected to give in-depth and complex accounts of incidents related to abstract concepts such as friendship, peer pressure, and isolation. On the other hand, as one selection criterion was that participants had achieved outstanding school exit examination results, that is in the Kong Diploma of Secondary Education in the final year of their secondary school studies, having participants who were over 18 years old instead of the current under 18 secondary school pupils was an essential prerequisite for participant selection.

Sampling

Marshall (1996) suggested that there are three different approaches in sampling for qualitative research: convenience, judgement and theoretical. Convenience sampling involves the most easily accessible potential participants. Judgement sampling is based on the researcher's consideration of which potential participants would best fit with the research question and result in the most productive outcome. Theoretical sampling involves recruiting participants who are most likely to help build the theories that emerge through the data collection and analysis.

In this research project, the four recruitment criteria bear stronger elements of convenience and judgement sampling in the sense that the participants were recruited mainly from the school

where I taught and therefore accessibility of their personal contacts and their information was open, (i.e. listed information on school websites, school yearbooks and graduation booklets) and as these participants were above 18 years of age and were people with relatively higher verbal proficiency as proven in their language exam results, their ability to offer verbal narratives was likely to be sufficient for this research. Furthermore, the potential participants mainly came from the school where I worked, a school setting in which my professional experiences informed my understanding and pre-assumptions on the issues to friendship development of academic high achievers. Such choice of adult and linguistically proficient participants was also in line with the spirit of theoretical sampling and the co-construction of meaning central to narrative inquiry.

Recruiting participants

A list of potential participants was drawn up based on the information available in the statistics released by the Hong Kong Examination and Assessments Authority (HKEAA, 2016-2018), schools' websites where lists of outstanding students were available to the general public, and through the researcher's own connections with the teachers and students in several mainstream secondary schools. Two other participants were invited through snowball sampling, that is the willing participants invited their university classmates who matched the selection criteria to take part in this research. Information sheets and invitation letters (appendix 9) explaining the details of this research including clauses on ethical issues were sent to potential participants via email in advance of the interviews in March and April 2019. While convenience, judgement and theoretical sampling informed the participant inclusion criteria, opportunity sampling was also used whereby potential participants who fell within the inclusion criteria and were available to take part in the project became the research participants. In total, ten participants were recruited to take part in this project. Eight of them were from the same boys' school where I taught; the other two attended co-educational mainstream secondary schools. The table below shows the general background and school or academic achievement-related particulars of the participants and how they were recruited.

Table 3.2.1b Participants' general background and recruitment

Participant's pseudonym	School attended	Public Exam achievement	Additional information
Chan	School A: Mainstream band	Top 0.2%	Member of the Gifted Academy

	1 government boys' school (graduated in 2016)		
Jason	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school (graduated in 2016)	Top 0.2%	Member of the Gifted Academy, with Physical Disability, good friend of Chan as mentioned by Chan himself
Tom	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school (graduated in 2015)	Top 0.2%	Member of the Maths Olympiad, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
Ken	School A: Mainstream band 1 boys' school (graduated in 2015)	Top 0.2%	Member of the Gifted Academy, buddy of Tom (as mentioned by Tom himself)
Joe	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school (graduated in 2017)	Top 0.2%	Senior Prefect, Leader of the Sea Cadet Corps
Don	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school	Top 0.2%	Leader of the school orchestra, withdrawn from school in S5 (2013-

	(graduated in 2016)		14) for cancer treatment
Jeff	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school (graduated in 2017)	Top 0.2%	Leader of the school orchestra, member of Physics Olympiad, deputy head prefect
Billy	School A: Mainstream band 1 government boys' school (graduated in 2017)	Top 0.2%	Head prefect of the Careers Counselling Team
Mary	School B: Mainstream Band 1 Direct Subsidy Co-educational school (graduated in 2015)	Top 0.2%	Committee member of the Christian Fellowship
Dora	School C: Mainstream Band 1 aided co-educational school (graduated in 2012)	Top 0.2%	School prefect

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

In order to solicit participants' in-depth personal subjective accounts of their experiences, conducting individual interviews between one interviewer and one interviewee was considered more appropriate for this research's data collection as compared to observations or field studies in which participants' subjective perceptions or unobservable inter-and intra-personal

dynamics might not be noticeable. When choosing among different forms of interviews, the advantages afforded by a one-on-one interview rather than a group interview - of safeguarding privacy and of allowing more tailor-made individual-based interview questions according to the unique characteristics and experiences of each individual interviewee - were a crucial consideration. Among three forms of individual interviews: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and open interviews, semi-structured interviews could maintain a relatively appropriate balance between soliciting interviewees' accounts inductively while reasonably adhering to the intended research focus. In other words, semi-structured interviews were adopted as the data collection tool in this research project as they fit the paradigmatic assumption that values the complex, subjective and contextual nature of human experiences (Riessman, 1993). This is because through these interviews, although open-ended semi-structured questions were set to guide participants through, these questions were used as the starting point in the exploration of participants' experiences in a broadly inductive approach. In these interviews, participants exercised their own interpretation of the questions and autonomy in offering accounts which they felt most salient and significant to them in relation to the research topic, and their own voice was heard through their own narrative. These characteristics of semi-structured interviews fit with the methodological assumptions of narrative inquiry adopted for this research

Interview questions in the two interviews

The research data collection process was intended to consist of two interviews with each participant. The semi-structured questions allowed participants to exercise freedom in their responses while I as the interviewer maintained a basic level of control over the topics in the interview.

The first-round interview was conducted with a pre-set interview schedule (appendix 1). The interview schedule was drafted based on literature reviews on the research topic and on semi-structured interviews in human inquiry as stated in the literature review chapter. As I foresaw that possible clarifications or probing might be needed with different individual participants, the schedule included alternative ways of phrasing the same questions or sub-questions to scaffold the same core question. In the interviews, an inductive approach of enquiry was largely adopted which meant that I did not rigidly follow the pre-set interview schedule and might rearrange the order of the questions when appropriate. In many cases I asked new probing or follow-up questions based on the participants' reactions and replies. This flexible interviewing

schedule kept a balance between conducting interviews which were relevant to the intended research topic and at the same time retaining the possibility of exploring further and newer understandings of these participants' experiences according to their own knowledge. Such flexibility in questioning was particularly necessary in the interview with one of the participants who often tended to wander off topic and focus on talking about his present university life rather than his secondary school friendships (see Interview with Tom in appendix 1).

Interview schedules

Questions for first-round interviews

Illustrated by her example of adopting semi-structured interviews in narrative inquiry, Chase (2003) summed up that interview questions which were phrased with sociology-specific terminology failed to invite participants' to tell their own stories and she suggested beginning the interviews with broader and open parameters of people's life stories before going in-depth into the specifics related to the intended research focus. In view of this, the interview schedule of the first-round interviews (appendix 1) began with a general open-ended question in everyday language along the lines of: *"If you were to sum up your school experience, what would you say?"* and this was followed by a question like, *"You said you were very happy when you started S1; tell me more about why you were happy"*. When the replies from the interviewees touched on issues related to friendship or their interactions with their peers, more specific follow-up questions were asked, for example: *"You said you were happy because your classmates went to your home to play computer games; could you tell me more about the day when they were in your home?"* These questions for the first-round interviews were set following a broad-to-specific principle and aiming to build a positive rapport between the interviewees and me, to establish a general background understanding of the interviewees' school experiences, and ultimately to identify the most salient topics of interest related to the interviewees' school friendship experiences in a broadly inductive approach. As mentioned, the wording and order of the questions set in the interview schedule were flexibly adopted and adjusted during the interviews according to the flow and interactions.

Questions for second-round interviews

The interview schedule for the second-round interviews (appendix 2) was designed with the aim of exploring further some of the salient ideas found in initial analysis related to the school

friendship experiences mentioned by the participants in their first-round interviews. The interviews took place after an initial round of analysis of the data of the first-round interviews. In the second-round interviews, more focused questions were set. These questions were set based on the initial codes created through initial analysis of the first-round interview data and further literature review on these codes. Combining the insights acquired from the existing academic literature and the initial codes generated from the first-round interview data, a bespoke interview schedule was designed for each participant. The questions covered both emergent themes for all, and specific follow-up questions relevant to that participant only. The questions in the second-round interviews were also set in a semi-structured manner with an added emphasis on their relevance to friendship experiences at secondary school. Similar to the first-round interviews, the general-to-specific principle was also largely adopted in the second-round interviews, along with a flexible approach to the order and style of questioning. For example, when attempting to collect more data on the interviewees' experiences of loneliness, the first question asked was "*There has been a lot of research attention on the impact of loneliness. What is loneliness to you?*" Then, after the interviewee gave a reply to this general question, a specific personal follow-up question was asked – for example: "*Did you feel lonely when you were at school?*" or "*Did you feel lonely when you ranked first in the whole form?*".

Rationale for adopting different interview formats

Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the mode of interview for the first-round interviews as personal direct contact between the researcher and the participants was deemed to be conducive in establishing good rapport and the presence of visual clues in a face-to-face conversation is important in qualitative research interviews (Creswell, 1998). To enable participants to be better psychologically prepared for the interviews and in many cases as requested by the participants, the topics related to the questions of the first-round interviews were sent to interviewees in advance of the interviews. All ten first-round interviews with ten participants were conducted in Hong Kong and in London where I met each interviewee at a mutually agreed private venue face to face, except one who chose to be interviewed by telephone due to his physical conditions. The interviews were recorded with a hand-held audio recorder. Each of these first-round interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. Due to the fact that the participants were in Hong Kong while I was in the UK during the stage when the second-round interviews were scheduled, the second-round interviews were conducted in the format of real-time telephone conversations and on average they lasted for about 40 minutes. Although

telephone interviews are considered by some researchers as a less preferred option compared to face-to-face interview, a study has suggested that telephones may allow respondents to feel relaxed and able to disclose sensitive information, and evidence is lacking that they produce lower quality data (Novick, 2008). However, when real-time phone interviews were not feasible due to participants' personal reasons, the interviews were conducted in the form of audio-recorded messages on mobile phone through which I sent the interview questions to the participants and they replied at a time they preferred either in text or in audio form. In many cases, these being semi-structured interviews, new or follow-up questions were asked after receiving the participants' initial replies. A few rounds of exchanges of audio messages were subsequently conducted with some of the participants, amounting to on average 20 minutes of interviewing time of each of these participants. While the real-time phone conversations preserved the spontaneity and naturalness of a personal conversation, given that the topics covered in the second-round interviews involved abstract and specific emotional conceptualisations, the method of using audio messages for interviews allowed participants to digest the guiding questions without the pressure which might exist in a real-time interview as they could give their replies at their convenience and make corrections whenever they wished before sending their replies. Also, during the time when most of the second-round interviews were scheduled to be conducted, that is from January to February 2020, many of the participants who were medical students were busy with their supporting work during the coronavirus outbreak in Hong Kong, so exchanges of audio messages proved to be a more suitable interviewing method.

Procedure of the interviews

Pilot interviews

Before both the first-round and the second-round interviews were conducted, a face-to-face pilot interview was administered with an adult in the UK who shared similar qualities to the participants in this research project. Holloway (1997) advocated that when conducting a qualitative inquiry, researchers can pilot a study to assess the acceptability of an interview protocol. Using the interview schedule set for the first-round interview, the first pilot interview helped clarify how to improve the wording, the order of questioning and the duration of the interviews as well as my interviewing and record keeping skills. For instance, in a post-interview conversation with the participant in this pilot interview, asking him for his feedback on how easy or difficult it was to understand and give response to the questions, the participant explained both the practical and emotional discomfort he experienced when answering the

questions. For example: some questions were too broad for him to pinpoint a specific focus or some questions were not relevant to his educational context. Further, in his view, some questions were “too personal” and made him feel embarrassed. With the feedback from the interviewee in this pilot interview, the interview schedule with the ten participants was refined or reworded. For example, I either reworded the questions or noted to be more sensitive to the participant’s emotional reactions when asking questions related to judgement. For example, questions like *“Do you think friends were important when you were in secondary school?”* were reworded in a way more inviting for personal story telling such as *“Can you tell me about a positive/important time you spent together?”* and it might be followed by *“why did you find that event important?”*.

Likewise, before the conduct of the second-round interviews with the ten participants, a pilot interview took place with the same adult who was interviewed in the first pilot interview. The proposed interview schedule originally aimed to cover most of the initial codes identified in the first-round interview data. However, the pilot interview demonstrated the need to be selective in choosing the more relevant questions in order to solicit more in-depth accounts in response to more relevant questions. The pilot interview also exposed the problem that the interviewees might find some of the concepts such as intimacy or companionship too abstract to respond to in the environment of an interview and therefore the interviewees might be unable to give substantial impromptu responses. To mediate these issues, the interview questions for each interview were limited to around four core questions on the areas of the research topic which were most relevant to each particular participant. Interviewees were given the questions in text or audio messages prior to the interviews and were reminded that those questions were only tentative and could be amended or adjusted according to their replies during the interviews.

Format and duration of the interviews

Eight of the participants were my former students whom I had been corresponding with via email previously for other school related matters. Invitations with information about details of the first-round interviews attached were sent to these participants using the contact details I already had in March and April 2019. The other two participants provided their email addresses to me via their snowball sampling friends. The first-round interviews were conducted between April and August 2019 in London and Hong Kong. Each of these first-round interviews lasted

for about 40 to 60 minutes. Nine of these interviews were conducted in person in a private venue chosen by the participants and one participant with physical disability chose to participate in an interview by phone. The interviews were conducted in the participants' native language Cantonese and were audio-recorded. The second-round interviews were held between December 2019 and February 2020. Before these, participants were given the transcripts of their first interviews for their comments, and confirmation of their willingness to take part in the second-round interviews was sought. Nine participants were interviewed either by real-time phone conversations or by exchanges of audio messages. One participant was unable to take part in the interview due to personal matters. Similar methods of recording and transcribing the interview data as in the first-round interviews were adopted. The table below shows the formats and durations of interviews with the ten participants.

Table 3.2.2 Format and duration of interviews

Participant	First-round Interview	Second-round Interview
Chan	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)
Jason	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)	Audio message exchanges (approx. 20 mins)
Tom	Face-to-face interview (approx. 50 mins)	Not available for interview
Ken	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)
Joe	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Audio message exchanges (approx. 20 mins)
Don	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Audio message exchanges (approx. 20 mins)
Jeff	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)
Billy	Face-to-face interview (approx. 45 mins)	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)
Mary	Face-to-face interview (approx. 60 mins)	Real-time phone interview (approx. 40 mins)
Dora	Face-to-face interview	Audio message exchanges

	(approx. 45 mins)	(approx. 20 mins)
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3.2.3 Data processing and analysis of the first and second-round interviews

Initial processing of the data collected in the first-round interviews was conducted between September and November 2019 including transcribing the interviews and thematically coding the transcripts. With my academic background in translation, I was responsible for transcribing and translating the interview data. Due to the issue that Cantonese is a dialect in which some words cannot be presented in written form (Cheng & Tang, 2016), and as participants in this research were educated in a predominantly English-medium school context in which English as a medium of communication was prevalent, participants were offered the opportunity for transcription to be carried out in the language they preferred. Each of the participants preferred to have their interviews transcribed into English directly, instead of into a Cantonese Pin-yin or written Chinese version of transcription. As suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006), phase 1 of Thematic Analysis involves familiarisation with the data, and the transcription process itself was the first stage of familiarisation which also led to an initial stage of inductive analysis. Verbatim transcription was adopted in which the best efforts were made to retain information which was true to its original nature in the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.17). The transcripts were then sent to the participants for their comments and amendments. Most participants made no changes to the transcripts with the rare exception of amending certain numbers such as years, age range or subject names which had no major significance.

After the transcripts were endorsed by the participants, the transcripts were read repeatedly. Analytical memos on each interview were written both by hand and by word processor repeatedly during each reading to highlight the main points in the data (appendix 3). After the second reading of the transcripts and the corresponding analytical memos, a general profile for each participant was formed, detailing how friendships influenced their academic, personal and social developments in secondary school life with the assumption that these three areas would largely capture the interrelationships between friendship and the participants' school lives (appendix 4). This initial exploratory approach to the data was a crucial stage of familiarisation as it offered a comprehensive whole-person understanding of each individual participant by making association between the data collected inductively, that is anecdotal accounts of various aspects of their school lives, and the pre-determined research focus, that is the significance of friendship. After the writing of analytical memos and creating a general profile for each

participant, as in phase two of Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis, initial codes were generated manually. Each data set was divided into manageable segments in the format of a table with four columns, namely: data, code, over-arching code and notes (appendix 5). Each data segment was read semantically with equal attention. Oliver et al (2005) discussed the strengths and limitations of various approaches to transcribing qualitative interview data and they suggested that while non-verbal communication clues can also be meaningful data, a transcription without non-verbal communication is easier to read and less distracting. For this research, given the complexity in the bilingual (Cantonese to English) and bi-mode (spoken to written) translation from spoken Cantonese into written English, in order to avoid further complications and distractions, only semantic data were studied. This decision is also supported by Riessman's (2008) notion of focusing on the content when conducting thematic analysis, instead of why or how something is said. While trying to reduce distractions by omitting the non-verbal utterances or inferences in the transcription, in order to avoid missing important conversational cues when removing non-verbals, suggested by Oliver et al. (2005) as one of the solutions, I served as the interviewer and the transcriber of all the interviews with the awareness of maintaining faithfulness to the participants' narratives. After the transcribing process of all narratives was completed, each transcription was read carefully independently. Concepts which appeared repeatedly or were deemed significant were highlighted and an initial code was assigned to each of them under the "code" column. The codes were generated inductively without a specific reference to the research question and there were no limits to the number or types of codes. The entire data set of each interview was read through repeatedly and initial codes were assigned to a point of saturation, which was defined as: 'the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data. There are mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones' (Urquhart, 2013, p. 194). Then over-arching codes were formed by grouping similar ideas under a broader code. For example, when Ken mentioned he played basketball with his school mates in junior years but chose to stay in the classroom to chat with his classmates in the senior years, the codes initially assigned were "playing" and "chatting" and the overarching code was "leisure activities". Similarly, when Tom mentioned that his buddy understood how he felt and he knew how unhappy his buddy was when facing a dispute in class, the code initially assigned was "understanding" and this code was later put under the over-arching code "intimacy". Additional notes were made in the last column as further analytical note taking. The example below shows how Ken's account of one of the difficulties he experienced in his friendship with Tom was coded:

Table 3.2.3 Example of coding

Data	Keywords/code	Over-arching code	Notes
Ken: Er... yes. One of them was about our habits. I am a rather hygiene conscious person, but this friend was rather untidy . I remember when he sneezed...I sometimes felt a bit upset. But I tolerated it.	Hygiene conscious Untidy tolerated	Personality clash/differences Acceptance Tolerance	Ken felt he was different from Tom but he accepted their differences and learnt to tolerate his friend's shortcomings.

A similar practice of data processing was adopted for the second-round interviews (appendix 6). The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English transcripts and these were sent to participants for their comments. The transcripts were coded manually on the transcripts (appendix 7) in which repeated or significant concepts relevant to the initial codes established from the first-round interview data analysis were highlighted, and codes or over-arching codes were developed. A circular iteration process of the codes and over-arching codes and initial themes established in the first-and second-round interview data took place when the second-round interview data analysis was in progress. Similar to the practice of analysing the data of the first-round interviews, studying each participant's data resulted in an individual report of themes established by looking at the data from the two interviews of each participant as one integral entity (appendix 8). This individual analysis was conducted with a special attention to the data related to the participants' school friendship experiences and their academic high achiever context. These case-by-case analyses on each participant provided a more individual understanding of each participant before further cross-case analysis of the commonalities and differences across all participants was conducted. This proved to be a useful scaffolding step in the process of developing cross-case themes for the research topic.

With reference to the codes generated from the data, analytical memos and the profiles of each individual participant, as in the phases three to five of Braun & Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (that is searching, reviewing and defining and naming the themes), key salient concepts related to the research topic were selected to form the three main cross-case themes, and these became the integral part of the report (that is phase six of Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis, producing the report). These three broad themes are substantiated by subthemes

while discrepant findings are also presented to display the complexity and multiplicity of these adolescents' friendship experiences in school. After the report of the findings under three broad themes, some of the key elements in the findings are discussed in the Discussion of Findings section. The choices of these key elements were based on three general considerations:

1. The prevalence and significance of themes presented in the data: as this research topic on the academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools is a relatively novel study of a very specific group of adolescents in a unique school context, the unexplored and unknown nature of this student group led to a strong reliance on the data for the formation of themes. The more frequently appearing and/or stronger themes which appeared across participants were more likely to be chosen for further discussions;
2. The themes' relevance (both similarities and differences) to the existing body of knowledge on the research area(s): since friendship study has been a well-established academic tradition and the research efforts have yielded rich and complex findings and assertions in different disciplines, instead of proving or disproving the existing theoretical assertions, the theoretical and empirical literature serves as a starting point for exploring the diverse and complex experiences of these unique individuals;
3. How relevant these themes are to the researcher's personal and professional interests and concerns: the primary aim of embarking on this EdD research study was to facilitate the improvement of professional practice of the researcher and fellow teachers in similar education contexts, so the cross-case themes developed aimed to encourage further discussions and possibly practical measures to cater for the specific needs of different students as shown in the Implications to Practice section.

3.3 Ethical considerations

This study was authorised by the SSIS Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter. (See appendix 10 for copy of certificate of ethical approval) Since the research data collection was mainly conducted in Hong Kong, the principles on research ethics stipulated by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, University of Hong Kong, which closely comply with the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the SSIS Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter, were also followed which stipulate responsibilities to participants include informed consent, transparency, right to withdraw, incentives, harm arising

from participation in research, privacy and data storage and disclosure (BERA, 2018). The oral data recorded during the interviews was transcribed word for word and then translated into English (as the language preferred by the participants). Participants were given the right to listen to and to read all the audio and written data and transcripts at any time and were clearly told that they had the right to request the removal of any part or all of the data they presented during the interviews. The transcriptions were sent to participants for comments and to invite them to make any changes, or delete any of the information presented in the transcripts.

Participants were invited to take part in this research on a voluntary basis. The voluntary nature of participation was clearly stated on the information sheet and the consent form in both Chinese and English versions. Informed consent was sought from each participant. The same message of the participants' rights and freedom was reiterated during the interviews and in other stages of the project. For participants who were former students of the school where I taught, it was made clear that their acceptance or refusal to participate in this project would have no effect on the former-teacher - former-student relationship between them and me.

Although some participants in this research were friends or schoolmates of the other participants, any other people mentioned in the interviews were not informed of the content of the interviews nor that the interviews were held. When names or identifiable details of third parties were mentioned by the participants, they were given pseudonyms during transcription or were removed completely from the transcripts if the information was considered unnecessary to the research project. Admittedly, concealing participants' identities in this research posed challenges and was to a certain extent operationally difficult due to the unique contextualised narratives the participants' provided which might lead to easy identification. To reduce such problem, data which could reveal participants' identities were deleted as much as possible. No real names which could identify the participants, schools and other persons were used. The research data collected was stored in password-protected files and storage was in accordance with the procedures stated in Ethics Approval D1819-041 (See appendix 10). These details were explained to potential participants on the Information Sheet and the Consent Form of this research project (See appendix 9).

3.3.1 Ethical issues related to discussing sensitive topics

As this research aimed to explore the subjective experiences of the participants' school friendships, the pilot interviews revealed the questions in the interviews might lead to participants' emotional discomfort during or after the interviews. In order to avoid causing

harm to the participants, it was made clear at the beginning of the interviews that the participants had freedom to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview, or entire project at any time. While conducting the interviews, attention was paid to the participants' emotional state and questions were adjusted accordingly so as to avoid creating unpleasant feelings.

At the end of the interviews, participants were also given an opportunity to express their feelings about the interviews, and this sharing was made off record, as requested by them. While listening to their post-interview comments, albeit personal or casual, I as the researcher did not give any feedback or make any specific suggestions to their issues if they were considered to be irrelevant to this research project. After the transcription was completed and sent to the participants for their feedback, they were encouraged to make changes or to delete any part of the transcript of their interviews if they so wished.

3.3.2 Ethical issues arising from dual role of researcher and teacher

Although the analysis process was predominantly data-driven, it was inevitable and to a certain extent conducive that my existing knowledge and values might influence interpretation. My background of being a former teacher of some of the participants and sharing similar lived experiences might have both positive and negative impacts on data analysis. On the one hand, being their former teacher might have enriched the scope of data analysis as in the interviews with participants whom I taught before, my presence in the same incident narrated by the participants facilitated quicker or multi-perspective understandings of the same incidents. Such co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the researched gave rise to the possibility of creating an in-depth and multi-perspective exploration of the research topic, pertinent to narrative inquiry. Co-construction of meaning is a two-way interactive process between the researcher and the participants. While the dual role of being a researcher and the participants' former teacher bore merits to the conduct of this research project, researcher reflexivity was crucial in this project so that I could become more self-aware of the impact of my own pre-existing knowledge and of the values I might bring into the research and of how these would influence the research processes. Finlay mentioned that being reflexive means that the researcher becomes open about and accepts his/her presence in the research and questions one's own taken for granted assumptions (Finlay, 1998). In this research project, I made the constant efforts of questioning some of my pre-assumptions such as that every young person needs a friend or that extremely gifted students are usually loners and unable to connect with

other less able peers. With this “do not take things for granted” attitude, I tried to explore this research topic with a relatively more data-driven approach.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) suggested a number of measures to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research. Corresponding to the specific design of this research project, a number of his suggestions were adopted in this research. For maintaining internal credibility, Shenton proposed that the researcher should “develop an early familiarity with the culture of the participating organisations before the first data collection dialogues take place” (p. 65). This condition was well established due to my role as a teacher in Hong Kong teaching in three mainstream secondary schools for more than 20 years, and as a student going through a similar education system. The knowledge and experiences of Hong Kong school settings driven from my personal and professional perspectives enhanced the prior understanding of the characteristics of the contexts of this research project. Secondly, the adoption of semi-structured interviews as the research method and employing narrative inquiry as the methodological approach was established based on a broad study of existing literature on research design as well as my academic and professional knowledge and experiences. My academic qualifications in translation and English literature facilitated quality translation and narrative analysis; and my professional experiences in counselling and interviewing students and meeting parents facilitated the design of the interview schedule and sensitive and skilful administration of the interviews. To further improve the interview schedule, pilot interviews were conducted and the questions were amended based on the feedback from the participant in the pilot interviews as well as engaging in self-reflective evaluation in the form of reflexive audio journal and soliciting feedback from the participants after every interview. For example, after the pilot interview, the participant commented that a question like “Did you need friends when you were at school?”, a seemingly general and neutral question, was in fact an embarrassing question for him. This comment led to reflexive redesign of the question as discussed in the previous section. It was apparent that soliciting a narration instead of judgement from a participant was less sensitive, especially when the response potentially involved self-criticism. Thirdly, Shenton suggested using a wide range of informants as a means of triangulation via data sources. This research focused on the unique experiences of academic high achievers who studied in a specific school context and therefore random

sampling of all Hong Kong students would be inappropriate. Convenience sampling was thus used but in recognition of the limitation of focusing on one school, that I was part of, two of the participants were recruited through snowball sampling, that is asking the willing participants to invite their friends who possess similar backgrounds to take part in this research. In the end, the participation of the two female students (different gender) who graduated from two other mainstream secondary schools (different site) proved to enrich the research findings and to a certain extent facilitate triangulation.

In an attempt to acquire more thorough or comprehensive data from the informants, iterative questioning was adopted. The interview schedule included questions for assessing the interviewees' replies. For example, in the earlier part of the first-round interview, each interviewee was first asked to give an account of a friend who they regarded as a good friend, and an example of how good this friend was to him or her. After this narrative account of the interviewee's experience, in the later part of the interview, the interviewee was asked to define the qualities of a good friend. Having the sequence of asking for an anecdotal account of a real-life experience first before soliciting the same interviewee's abstract conceptual definition of friendship was a way to avoid the interviewee's recollection of real-life experiences being tainted by textbook or academic understandings which they might have acquired from other sources. After the interviews, in order to ascertain the accuracy of the interview data, member checks were performed by sending the transcripts to the interviewees for their comments.

Another way to confirm data from informants was to include other informants who might provide similar information from their own perspectives and based on their own experiences. In this research, although not intentionally planned, two pairs of participants identified themselves as close friends of each other: Tom and Ken, and Chan and Jason. The accounts of friendship experiences on similar events mentioned by them separately were found to match and this example of triangulation helped to confirm the authenticity of the information.

The last but the most important measure to safeguard trustworthiness of the research was peer scrutiny. Two experienced teachers who taught in Hong Kong secondary schools were invited to give feedback on the research topic, the research design and the data analysed. In particular, after I had transcribed the interviews, took notes and coded them on my own, I sent the transcripts to these two teachers for their reading. They then gave me a general summary of the main points they picked up from the data. Instead of a telephone conversation to discuss the main points, they sent their feedback by audio messages to me so that I was able to take a

passive and unobtrusive role when receiving their feedback. Their fresh perspectives were enriching and contributed to the refinement of the interview questions as well as to establishing themes from the data.

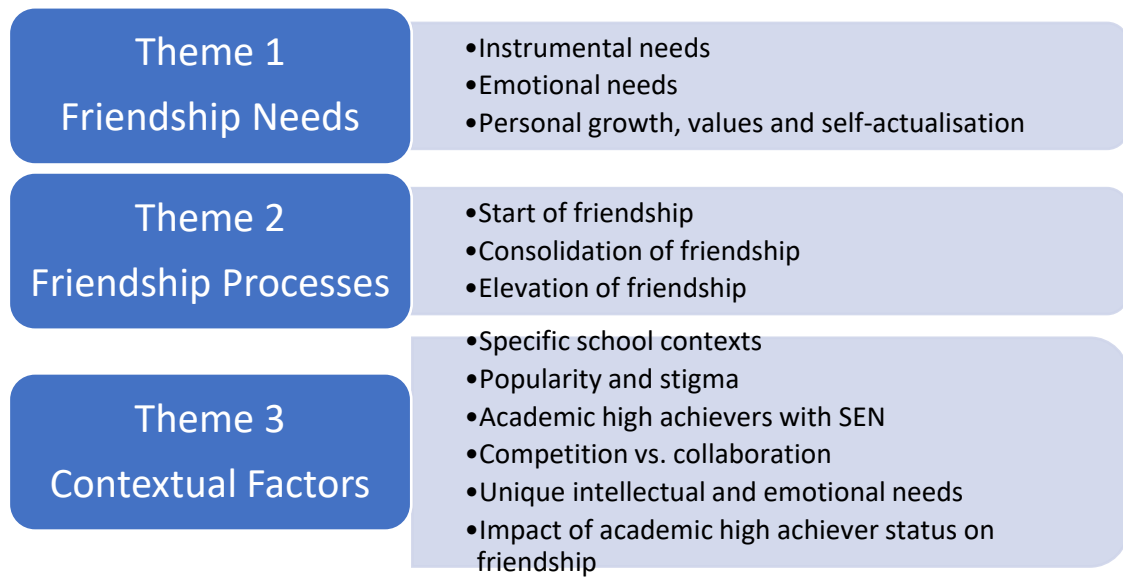
3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the rationale of adopting narrative inquiry as the basis of methodological positioning to address this research topic has been explained. Narrative inquiry was considered the most suitable methodology for exploring the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong schools as narrative inquiry entails the theoretical assumptions that human experiences are complex and contextual and that people's stories are central to our understanding of human experiences. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were adopted as methods of this research project for data collection and data analysis. In the final part of this chapter, ethical considerations and measures taken to enhance trustworthiness have been discussed. After an introduction of the research design and the considerations taken before and during the data collection and analysis procedures, the next chapter presents a report of the findings under themes and supported by quotations extracted from participants' narratives.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I present the findings, which are organised into three main broad themes related to the participants' self-reported accounts of their recollections of secondary school friendship experiences. As shown in Figure 4, Theme 1 is about the friendship needs of these academic high achievers who studied in Hong Kong secondary schools; Theme 2 is about participants' school friendship processes; and Theme 3 is about contextual factors of these specific academically high achieving participants which influenced their school friendship development. Each theme was given a numbered heading and divided into numbered subthemes. Some of the more complex subthemes were further divided into sections with headings which were not numbered. The themes were illustrated with quotes extracted from the transcripts of the interviews. The findings quote extensively from the interviews with the intention that longer quotations will maintain the authenticity of the participants' narratives in line with narrative inquiry. Theme 1 looks at the participants' experiences from the perspective of the purposes or unintentional outcomes of school friendships, in particular how their various needs in adolescence were met through their friendship experiences at school. Theme 2 explores the contributing factors in different stages of the participants' school friendships. The participants' narratives suggest that factors contributing to the start, consolidation and elevation of friendship include similarity, shared activities and educational trajectory, intimacy, altruism and teachers' involvement. In Theme 3, these participants' school friendship experiences were also characterised by their unique individual qualities of being academic high achievers and the unique circumstances and contextualised experiences brought by their academic qualities. Figure 4 illustrates the three themes and their subthemes.

Figure 4 Themes and subthemes from findings of the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools



Theme 1

4.1 Friendship needs

The participants in this research reported a range of different needs which were satisfied through their friendship experiences in varied school situations. These needs are broadly categorised into instrumental needs, emotional needs and self-actualisation needs. As the participants' friendships deepened, their friends fulfilled a wider range of needs including their emotional and self-actualisation needs. However, instrumental needs and the satisfaction of these was the starting point for the further development of their friendships.

4.1.1 Instrumental needs

The instrumental needs for making friends in a school setting during adolescence are a crucial part of the everyday conduct of adolescent life as a school student. The participants' friends in secondary school satisfied their different essential practical needs in conducting their everyday school life. These needs included such practical needs as having a person who assisted the participants to get access to academic resources and learning opportunities or to handle personal or social matters. The figure below shows the four general needs for school friendships for instrumental purposes.

Figure 4.1.1 Needs for school friendships for instrumental purposes

Instrumental Needs			
Friends as Academic learning partners	Friends as advisors and mediators	Friends as co-workers	Friends as company

Friends as academic learning partners

In schools where collaborative learning was commonly practised, the instrumental needs for friendship might even exceed the importance of the emotional satisfaction that participants received in friendship. With the exception of Dora, the participants' narratives show that the need for academic cooperation and collaborative learning was a precondition, or motive, of having their first school friend, as all the participants except Dora attended a school where project work and collaborative learning were commonly assigned. When the participants recalled entering secondary school, many of them encountered situations in which they had to form their own groups for collaborative work, and thus felt the need to find classmates with whom they could cooperate in their learning. Their choice of a partner for teamwork was either free or arbitrary but it might also have been subject to predetermined environmental factors. The following is a quote extracted from the first interview with Mary in which she explained that because of the need for having groupmates for group work, she had to make friends with two other newcomers:

(1st interview) Mary: when we worked in groups, there were 17 girls in my class... 19 girls. That means when there were four people in a group, there were three odd ones. I was one of those three. This made ... it was like my learning environment was I was a newcomer and I happened to be in the same group with this classmate and I needed to be friends with her.

Apart from the learning activities which took place in lessons, all participants, with the exception of Dora, also engaged in afterschool academic-related practice such as group oral practice or tutorial classes. These academic-oriented after-school activities were conducted collaboratively. For example, in Joe's account, he and his friends extended their academic discussion to after-school hours and teamed up to conduct extra learning during the study break before the public examinations. Such academic collaboration with school friends benefited him as he gained practical support for the examinations:

(1st Interview) Joe: (During the study break before the HKDSE) When I went back to school, we prearranged the time to get together. Most of the time we asked others when we had questions [...] Most often we did oral practice, say Chinese and English oral practice, group discussions [...] I found that in that period, I did a lot of practice alone and I might lack interactions with others. This could make me feel nervous in the group discussions in the

speaking exams. So if I could keep practicing for the oral exam, our performance would improve.

Other participants including Mary, Chan and Ken also found that their friends were an important asset in their academic learning. Ken was particularly grateful for his best friend's help in guiding his learning of the subjects he found most difficult. He attributed his excellent exam result in Chinese Language to his best friend's frequent coaching:

*(1st Interview) Ken: He taught me Chinese [...] We attended tutorial school for Chinese in senior years. This friend always reminded me what the tutor said and in Chinese writing or integrated skills, he reminded me to use certain writing methods [...] When we received the Chinese assignments from our teacher, he would read my work and gave me some opinions. It was very helpful to me and I finally got 5** in Chinese.*

While Tom admitted that he enjoyed the company of Ken in academic learning, and Ken said that he benefited from Tom's academic support, Tom did not think his friend was of significant use for his academic progress. Tom saw academic studies and achievements as the most crucial part of his student life, described friends as “non-essential goods” and said that compared to luck, friends had little impact on how he performed academically.

(1st interview) Tom: My performance would not have got worse [because of not having a friend]. Performing worse was actually difficult as getting a certain grade was to some extent a matter of luck [...] Friends are just like non-essential goods. You won't die if you don't have friends.

Similar to Tom, although Dora claimed that she sometimes needed her friends to help her in her weaker subjects - Mathematics and Geography - she mostly studied independently, especially during the period before the public exam. She did not need friends and she could study more effectively when alone as she found her friends' presence distracting.

(1st interview) Dora: Actually, I only studied by myself. In senior years before the mock exam, they suggested going to self-study room after school together. But I found that I couldn't stay focused in that environment. So for my studies and revision, I preferred to be on my own. In senior form in S4, I didn't feel the exam pressure.

Friends as advisors and mediators

Apart from the needs for academic collaboration in their learning, friends also served as advisors on education or career planning issues or mediators in participants' personal problems. Joe was under great stress when he was overloaded with schoolwork and overseas university applications. Joe's best friend offered useful information to him by sharing with Joe his relatives' overseas studies experiences.

(1st interview) Joe: We might talk about which subject to choose, which university we found interesting, and he shared his relatives' experiences of studying overseas with me. He was someone who gave advice.

Although Tom did not need to rely on his friend in his academic learning, he had frequent interpersonal disputes, and thus he needed his friend to serve as a mediator to resolve his interpersonal conflicts with his "enemy". Both Tom and Ken mentioned these incidents in their interviews.

(1st interview) Tom: Because I... he was the only one who understood the conflicts between me and my enemy. He understood. He was on my side and he supported me. He helped to maintain peace to the end... because... the only one... only a handful of schoolmates were both friends of mine and my enemy's. Also, Ken was a friendly person, no one would attack him. If other people found that you picked on Ken, the whole world would be against you. Since everyone respected Ken, he could help to resolve our conflicts.

(1st interview) Ken: This friend [Tom] had an enemy at that time in academic studies. I also had some chances to cooperate with this so-called enemy, in Physics. We held some competitions in the Physics Club. A group of students who were strong in Physics were recruited to take part in the competition. This enemy didn't invite my friend. My friend was very unhappy and got angry in front of this enemy. He asked me to show him the notes... at last, I secretly showed my friend the notes and when this enemy asked me why my friend knew the questions in the notes, I had to tell lies and pretended I didn't know.

Friends as co-workers in school extra-curricular activities and leadership duties

Apart from academic studies, many of the participants took up major school leadership roles and, either by chance or by choice, paired up with their friends in duties such as the Prefect Board, Counselling Team or Orchestra. They shared school duties and worked together to

organise school events. With their friends' support, they achieved rewarding results or overcame difficulties they encountered in their duties.

Before Don's illness, he led the Orchestra as the Conductor while his friends were fellow orchestra members. When asked to talk about the happiest school experience he had, he recalled their surprising good result at a school music festival.

(1st interview) Don: Yes. It was the first year our orchestra took part in a competition. We didn't think, as it was the first time we just wanted to try, but we came second. We were very happy. Some of them were also in the same class with me so we were closer friends.

Like Don who had a strong passion for music, Jeff was also a leader of the Music Society. Jeff formed a cross-year group friendship with Pun who was one year older than him and a former chairperson of the Music Society. Jeff confided to him about the problems he faced in the administration of the Music Society, Pun and Jeff then worked together to resolve the problems and improved the running of the society.

(1st interview) Jeff: Pun and I were both in the Orchestra. [...] In S4, the incident happened. At that time, Pun was the chairperson of the Music Society. Many things involved him. So I asked him whether he knew what was going on. [...] we discussed our plans together in a group. [...] So Pun didn't just give me suggestions. We worked together in the whole team of the Music Society.

Friends as company in non-structural school time

Friends were needed for being a companion during non-structural informal school time such as recesses or lunch hours. Mary and Dora, the two female participants in this study, reported that needing company during recesses or after-school hours was particularly important to reduce their feeling of loneliness.

(1st interview) Dora: My classmates and I formed a clique and we were happy. The significance was they made my secondary school life happy and I didn't feel lonely as I had a group of classmates to chat and share.

Mary realised that many of her first S1 schoolmates had already formed their own friendship groups at the beginning of S1 as these schoolmates came from the same classes of the primary section of the school. Feeling herself as an outsider, Mary was particularly aware of the need

to have someone as a companion so that she could feel less isolated, or at least not be seen as a “loner” by others. She therefore became friends with two other newcomers who seemed to be in the same awkward situation. Although Mary admitted that she did not feel in tune with these two girls’ personalities and she did not feel truly connected to them, they stayed together when doing group projects and during recesses.

(1st interview) Mary: We always had 20 minutes between two lessons and we only had five lessons. We then went to buy snacks at the tuckshop together and we bought lunch and sat down together to eat. As other people were together with their friends, I wanted to stay close with some people so I didn’t feel too isolated.

Mary admitted that her friendship with the two girls in junior years was merely instrumentally motivated. She also admitted that she felt insecure and found it stressful as she was aware of the self-interested practical motive behind their friendship.

(1st interview) Mary: This pressure was particularly strong in the junior forms...I didn’t “break up” with her (one of the friends in the junior years)...because I felt more secure during recess when I had her with me... Somehow, I felt under pressure. Maybe because we knew there was a purpose behind our friendship, that was to make ourselves feel more comfortable. I had to compromise or forgo my own wishes so that I could have a friend beside me.

4.1.2 Emotional needs

Although the types and degrees of instrumental needs varied among the participants, there appeared to be a general agreement that these participants needed their school friends to satisfy their emotional needs. They all said they felt happy and less stressed when they had friends in school. However, under their common desire for emotional satisfaction, there were complexities and personal diversities in their emotional needs in school friendships which were characterised with the co-existence of emotional dependence and independence in friendship as shown in Figure 4.1.2.

Figure 4.1.2 Co-existence of emotional dependence and independence in friendship

Co-existence of emotional dependence and independence in friendship		
Friends as a source of joy and a sense of companionship in the participants' school lives	Close friends as good listeners encouraging free expressions of inner emotions	Emotional independence; loneliness and aloneness

Friends as a source of joy and a sense of companionship in the participants' school lives

For all participants in this research, friends were a source of emotional satisfaction, whose emotional input was treasured. From friends whom they regarded as companions or playmates in school or leisure activities, the participants found fun, relaxation and a sense of belonging to the school community. For example, Dora, although claiming she did not really need her friends to help her much with academic learning, repeatedly admitted in her narratives that being with her friends after school made her happy and not lonely.

(1st interview) Dora: We were happy. We didn't want to go home after school. We sometimes played badminton together or went to other schools to watch our school teams play. So on the whole my secondary school life was a very happy period of my life. The significance was they made my secondary school life happy and I didn't feel lonely as I had a group of classmates to chat and share.

Similarly, Ken defined his friendship experience in the junior years as having some friends to have fun and play games with. They shared a lot of joyful moments. When asked to recall the happiest moment of his junior school years, he mentioned playing tricks on teachers with his friends and inviting his friends to play computer in his home.

(1st interview) Ken: I remember in S2, a group of my friends came to my home to play PSP. It was a happy memory. Er... also... maybe teachers didn't know, in junior years, we played tricks on teachers together. There was a teacher called Mr Wong. We made a lot of noise in his class. I feel we had a close and trusting relationship [...] They gave me a happy memory. We did all these together, playing games and making fun of teachers.

Although many of these high achieving participants reckoned that they could lead an independent student life and usually knew how to handle their own everyday issues at school, they still craved the companionship of their friends and shared their thoughts with them even when they knew their friends could not give them practical solutions to their problems. For example, some participants, despite not feeling the need for practical academic assistance from their friends, still continued to engage in academic collaboration with their friends as they felt academic interaction with their friends was a good way to reduce stress. To almost all of the participants, except Dora, having a friend to study with was good for their emotional wellbeing in the most stressful time before and during public exams. This applied even to students whose exam scores ranked first in the entire candidate population, like Chan.

(1st interview) Chan: I usually talked about my problems not because I wanted to get suggestions from others as I normally knew what I should do. But you know, I usually felt agitated when facing a problem, it was having someone to talk to and listen to me. I didn't like talking about my problems with everyone. I only talked about these things with those closer to me.

Aside from having friends accompanying them on their academic journey, emotional support was particularly important to Don and Jason who both experienced health problems. When Don was hospitalised in an isolation ward for months, his friends' gestures of concern and encouragements sent to him by phone were a major source of emotional support.

(1st interview) Don: I started the treatment and realized it was a long and exhausting treatment. I felt down and physically tired and worried. I was rather unhappy. But I had my friends. They supported me such as, I remember, they wrote a card for me. And they Whatsapped me to ask how I was. They helped a lot psychologically.

Jason did not share his feelings about his disability and health issues. He said his goal of life and the purpose of making friends was to be happy. Jason tried to gain and offer happiness through academic and leisure activities with friends. Companionship with his friends was a source of his happiness.

(2nd interview) Jason: Even when we were studying, I could be happy if I was with my friends to exchange ideas and discuss some academic topics. Friends to me were those for frankly exchanging thoughts and feelings and doing things that make each other happy, no matter when, studying, going to school or playing, to do something that were mutually happy.

They made me feel less bored and we could exchange ideas and practise together. [...] That was a very happy process.

Close friends as good listeners encouraging free expressions of inner emotions

Friends who were regarded as close or best friends by the participants provided another or in some sense a higher level of emotional satisfaction. Many of them treasured their best friends for being good listeners who were non-judgemental yet inspiring and willing to take the participants' problems as their own priority without any apparent self-interested motives. In Mary's experience, the best friend she met in the senior form was a classmate to whom she

revealed her inner thoughts and the most vulnerable side of herself. From her best friend's emotional interactions, she felt her personality was valued, regardless of her academic identity.

(1st interview) Mary: She was very willing to listen to me and I felt she was trustworthy. I was willing to tell her a lot...things ...something that I usually could not tell others as I thought they were some most vulnerable topics, those would hurt me most. But she was willing to discuss with me and was willing to listen to me. I also felt that it was comfortable to cry in front of her...I felt that actually...instead of talking about my studies, someone would be willing to listen to my stories and something non-academic.

Being an exceptionally academically able student, Billy rarely needed practical support from his friends, rather he was often the giver instead of the receiver of help in his interactions with friends involving learning or organising extra-curricular activities. While he was self-sufficient academically, his intense frequent interactions with his best friends at school, after-school and online showed that friends were very important to him at a more personal level. He said that having good friends gave him a sense of companionship and “affiliation”. He enjoyed the interpersonal closeness with his best friends.

(1st interview) Billy: This friend was - what sort of significance? Actually it was we accompanied each other to go through this secondary school period. A companion, a sense of affiliation. It means, it makes you feel you belong to... a closeness with people around you.

Lee: Good. And you needed this feeling?

Billy: Yes. I think I needed it.

Emotional independence

Although the participants all treasured their emotional bonds with their friends, some of them chose to maintain independence and chose to keep their feelings to themselves when they were faced with some unique emotional stressors in their personal lives. For example, Jason chose to hide the painful everyday difficulties caused by his disability as he felt that he should not transfer his own negative feelings to his friends and make others unhappy and he could divert his attention to enjoying the fun and relaxation with his friends.

(2nd interview) Jason: I never told my friends that I was unhappy or why I was unhappy. [...] I didn't like to share negative feelings or experiences and I just simply wanted to have fun with my friends, which would indirectly allow me to adjust my mentality and face the stress.

Similarly, when Chan injured his shoulders before the mock exam and faced the prospect of not being able to perform well in the exams, he did not share his worries with friends but found his own methods to solve his problems. This account of his keeping his worries to himself contrasted with his usual practice of talking about almost everything about learning and school duties with his best friends. He was aware of the limited extent of emotional support a friend could offer.

(2nd interview) Chan: Of course they [the strategies] were thought by myself. I didn't expect other people could say something very inspiring. Talking to other people about it, as you could expect, most responses were would be like: "Hope you get better! Be more careful! Have more rest!". I appreciated their concerns but... It is hard for them to say something very inspiring. They are not you so they don't know how you feel. How could they say something about your feelings from your heart? Only I myself understand my own feelings. So I thought about how to sort things out by myself.

Chan's extremely high ranking in academic examination scores created some unique and unusual emotional dilemmas. It was ironic that when Chan ranked number one among all candidates in his year group, instead of celebrating his success, he felt that the weeks that followed were the unhappiest moment of his life as he felt annoyed by the intense intrusion of news reporters. However, he did not share his annoyance with his friends as he felt that his problem would not be shared by his friends who got less impressive exam results. This situation was similar to Dora's disappointment over her exam results in S5. To deal with their negative emotions, Chan and Dora resorted to their own means by either discussing their feelings with teachers or just putting the feelings aside and moving onto other events in life.

(1st interview) Chan: When the DSE exam results were released, there were many news reporters who wanted to interview me. I wasn't happy at that time even though I got very good exam results. [...] So it was troublesome. And some tutorial centres invited me to appear in their advertisements. I felt I became other people's tool for making money. I felt very bad about it. But at that time, I could not find my friends to talk about it. As many of my friends didn't do very well [...] I had no reason to talk about my problems with them. If I had said to

*them that I got 5** for 6 subjects, there were a lot of news reporters and I felt unhappy, of course no one would have given a damn about it. That's why I found teachers to talk to.*

(2nd interview) Dora: I remember I was quite confident in my academic performance in S5, I didn't know I would have done badly in exams. But it was only S5 and I could study S6 anyway. Also, my friends didn't have better results than me, except one. I had no reason to complain about my results in front of my friends. So I didn't tell them my disappointment. And I immediately took up a summer job after the end of the school year in S5, so we moved on and didn't talk much about it.

Chan and Dora chose to keep their feelings to themselves when facing situations which troubled them emotionally because they thought that their friends did not have the same academic attainment or the same experiences and therefore would not be able to empathise with their situation or they did not want to burden their friends emotionally.

Loneliness and aloneness

The participants' attempt to maintain a suitable balance between academic and emotional independence and dependence in friendships was illustrated in their comments about whether they experienced loneliness and whether they enjoyed staying alone in the years when they were secondary school students. In response to these questions, Chan gave a unique explanation on his understanding of loneliness and aloneness. He had a rather unique understanding about loneliness that he believed people only feel lonely when they felt helpless in a difficult situation.

(2nd Interview) Chan: I might be seen to be alone on many occasions in the eyes of others. I might be seen as lonely but I feel... I think loneliness is a question about feeling. It is not about having someone to be with you and you don't feel lonely. People feel lonely because of their own reasons. Maybe it was because of their thinking habit, making them have a feeling of helplessness towards life and the problems they face, feeling no one can help them. This has nothing to do with whether they are accompanied by friends. I think, even when you feel lonely and you have a friend to chat with, but after chatting for a while, you still need to go home. It is not possible that your friend follows you home. There are always moments you have to leave

your friends and go home. The feeling of loneliness might come back. This means the problems have not been solved.

Chan perceived that loneliness was caused by feeling helpless. As he increasingly managed to solve his own problems in his own ways, he did not feel lonely in most days. He was able to lead a self-sufficient life, academically and emotionally. Although he valued having friends for company and sharing, he also enjoyed having the freedom in solitude.

(Second Interview) Chan: Some people might feel bad to have lunch alone, it looked boring, so they feel they do not have companionship. To me, I feel good instead. Being alone is good and I do not need to be accompanied by others most of time. About being alone, to me, it is wonderful. One thing is no one will restrict me and I don't need to care about others. [...] I can turn on the volume to watch Youtube, do whatever I like. It's good to have freedom.

Similar to Chan, Dora and Jeff also felt that being alone was enjoyable and even made excuses from friends so that they could stay alone.

(2nd interview) Dora: I didn't feel lonely. When I was at school, probably not...aloneness... I don't have any memory of that... I think I never felt lonely because I actually quite enjoyed being on my own.

(2nd interview) Jeff: In a big crowd, yes... there were cases when I lied and pretended to be unwell, saying I was sick but actually I wasn't really ill.

To Ken, loneliness was a complex state that varied contextually, mainly determined by the environment and peer dynamics. In general, Ken's intense passion for animals was so engrossing that he did not need to have friends to accompany him when he was fully engaged in his animal watching hobby. However, when he was surrounded by peers who seemed to have formed a clique and he felt he was an outsider, the negative feeling of loneliness would overpower his individual interest.

(2nd interview) Ken: I feel I am an introvert. About animals, I was happy if I could discuss with others about animals. But for this hobby, I didn't need to have 5 or 10 friends to watch an animal together. We could not look at the same jar together. I would be very happy just staring at the jar alone.

[...] Looking at the jar could be a happy experience... but if there were a group of classmates chatting happily, say when I was sitting at the corner, they were playing happily, then I would feel I had no friends and felt lonely. I would feel unhappy and wanted to fill this emptiness. So I would look at the jar in a different mood and told myself I should stay alone as no one accompanied me.

4.1.3 Growth of personality, values and self-actualisation

Most participants commented that they did not make friends for the pragmatic motivation of gaining practical or emotional benefits, but these positive outcomes were naturally produced unintentionally through their friendship interactions. When this research was conducted, the participants were all over 18 and had completed secondary education. Being asked as adults to reflect on how their secondary school friends facilitated their personal growth, many of them believed that their friendship experiences had shaped their personality, values and attitudes. Their narratives show that their school friends, including those who were only playmates for a short stage during their secondary school lives, those who became stable long-term friends and even the friendships that fell apart, played a significant part in their whole-person growth and the process of self-actualisation. Through interacting with their friends, they have become who they are today. Figure 4.1.3 shows the lessons the participants learnt from positive and negative school friendship experiences.

Figure 4.1.3 Growth of personality, values and self-actualisation

Growth of personality, values and self-actualisation	
Lessons learnt in positive friendships Reinforcing their own values Facilitating self-evaluation and improvement Establishing self-confidence Enhancing acceptance and social skills	Lessons learnt from failed friendships Acquiring a better understanding on interpersonal relationships

Reinforcing their own values

All of the participants except for Tom and Ken befriended people who had similar values and attitudes. Through the positive interactions with these friends, they consolidated their own

values. Dora felt that she continued to be a positive and kind-hearted person under the reinforcement of being surrounded by friends who held similar values.

(1st interview) Dora: Influence to my growth [...] as these friends are still my friends now... I think as we could become friends because we had something similar, we had similar values so we stayed together. I feel this had a function of reinforcement. As we all thought in the same way, my own values were reinforced. These friends were rather positive and kind-hearted. I feel they had a good impact on me.

Joe also mentioned the positive enriching effects of having kind-hearted friends. He stressed that a school was not just a place for academic learning but - to him most importantly - it was for learning to get along with others. He felt that his experiences of mutual support with friends in school nurtured his value of mutual support with friends and other members of the community in later life. This virtue has become important in his adult life.

(2nd interview) Joe: Interacting with my friends made me understand the importance of mutual support. Sometimes when I had something I didn't understand in my studies, my friends taught me. When my friends had a problem when doing their schoolwork, I helped them. This was an important part for me to form a perspective to life, this attitude should be helpful to me in the future when I work.

Other than having friends with similar values and therefore having their pre-existing values reinforced, some participants were inspired by their friends' differences and learnt to improve their own personality and values. For example, Jeff was very grateful for Lai whose firm moral principles helped him to develop clearer moral standards when performing his prefect duties. From Jeff's friendship with Yuen, the Head Boy of the school and a top student in his year group, he observed how Yuen interacted with others and gained a better understanding of his own strengths and weaknesses. Jeff said that having friends was important to him as he treasured intellectual and personal exchanges which paved the way to self-exploration.

(1st interview) Jeff: I think they (friends) could enrich my own understanding of myself... The main point was to find out who I am, what I like and what I dislike. This could inspire me a lot. [...]

(2nd interview) Jeff: When we [Jeff and Yuen, the head boy] came onto the stage to speak publicly in the assemblies. I really got on the stage to observe the differences and how people

felt when Yuen was on the stage and when I was on the stage... I found that it could lead to different outcomes, so I learned more about myself and understood him better.

Facilitating self-evaluation and improvement

Jeff saw his equally outstanding friend Yuen as both a friend and a positive competitor whose presence facilitated Jeff's evaluation of his own strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, many of these academic high achieving participants who had a strong awareness of their academic and intellectual prowess did not see their outstanding exam results as a useful indicator of their academic potentials. In Chan's case, to fully actualise and prove his intellectual abilities, he found positively competing with his equally academically strong friends was a good way to acquire a better understanding of his strengths and areas for improvement. This kind of positive competition was especially frequent between Chan and Jason. Chan liked sending Jason some difficult exam questions to see how correctly and quickly Jason could answer them. Chan said that he did not only want to know whether Jason could answer the questions; by knowing how fast Jason could solve the exam questions, he could have a more accurate assessment of his own ability and identify areas for improvement.

(1st interview) Chan: I liked, when seeing some difficult questions, I knew how to do it. Then I sent it by Whatsapp to Jason. I wanted to see if he knew how to do it... I wanted to see if he could do it. If he could do it, I would ask if he could do it easily or he found it difficult [...] So that I could know my standard. If I could only do it with a lot of efforts but other people could do it easily, this proved that I was not good enough...I needed to practise more.

Interestingly, although his primary motive was to improve his own academic ability and performance, in these interactions of positive competition with an equally high achieving friend, Chan did not only improve intellectually but he said he also developed a more relaxed attitude towards success and failure and became less concerned about academic ranking.

(1st interview) Chan: I feel they made me feel less concerned about rankings. On the contrary, I became more concerned about... I felt relaxed about positive competition. I do not mind being taken over... instead it was a way of boosting me to go forward.

Establishing self-confidence

The above examples show that Chan and Jeff developed confidence in their abilities by engaging in positive competition with equally outstanding friends in academic learning and

leadership. Likewise, Mary also found her friendship with the best friend in senior form had a significant impact on her confidence about her identity and charisma. In her senior years, she felt that her best friend, although not physically with her all the time in school, was always available for her when she needed support. This sense of security created a positive impact on her confidence to accept and develop her own independence and uniqueness. This self-confidence has continued to influence her values and mindset at university.

(2nd interview) Mary: The ones who gave me inspiration for my own growth, these classmates, were my best friends in senior forms. I would say she was the one who gave me a lot of insights into life. Being with her was very comfortable [...] I felt she was very mature and I felt very secure. I found that I could also become this kind of friend and make other people feel good. I found that when I became this kind of individual, I had my own attractions [...] Even today at university, I feel I am independent and do not need to follow others. I feel I have a strong sense of self-actualisation, not following others.

Enhancing acceptance and social skills

In Mary's senior class, she also made friends with a few classmates who had unusual behaviour and unique interests. She enjoyed the diverse friendship experiences she had with her classmates. Similarly, the positive impact of having a friend with special characteristics was most obvious in Ken's narrative of his close friendship with Tom. While Ken learnt to be a mediator in the disputes between Tom and his "enemy", Ken also said that from his everyday interactions with Tom, he learnt to be patient and tolerant. His experiences of socialising with a person with special needs have made him become more open-minded and welcoming in making friends with people from all walks of life at university.

(1st interview) (About his friendships with Tom and the playful friends in junior years) Ken: It allowed me to develop greater acceptance of people with different personalities. In university, in the programme I am studying, some classmates are, in other people's eyes, not so moral. Other classmates tend to keep a distance from them. But to me, I am curious about them and would want to make friends with them.

Now I think about it, it is because I had friends like them, so I am not afraid to meet people like them.

Acquiring a better understanding of inter-personal relationships

All participants in this study formed close friendship with at least one of their schoolmates and many of their close friendships have continued until today regardless of the changes of circumstances. However, many of them also mentioned some friendships that faded away or came to an unpleasant ending. Jeff and Ken gave very detailed accounts about their unhappy friendship experiences. In their cases, their friendships ended with verbal or even physical confrontations, but they believed these unpleasant friendship experiences inspired them and shaped their values.

For example, some participants acquired a better understanding on interpersonal relationships through negative friendship interactions. When Jeff was disappointed to find that his friend badmouthed him behind his back, he took the initiative to ask his friend to discuss the matter face-to-face. In this confrontation, Jeff felt he had done the right thing as he could clarify the misunderstanding. Although their friendship ended afterwards, he found this friendship had inspired him to think about different types of friendships.

(1st interview) Jeff: My solution finally was to talk about it with him and find out what happened. It was sorted and I told him my standpoint. But our friendship ended. But at least I took an active role in explaining my standpoint [...] I became more mature in forming friendship. I knew better who I am and who I could make friends with and who were the ones I could chat with. This incident made me understand that there are many different levels.

Ken, was well-regarded by his peers and teachers in the senior years for his friendly and easy-going disposition. Yet surprisingly he had an unpleasant conflict with his friends when he was in S4. His disagreement with his friends on money issues led to an emotional explosion. He was so angry that he had a fight with one of his friends. He subsequently regretted his actions and formed a more mature and relaxed attitude towards money and interpersonal relationships.

(1st interview) Ken: In S4 when I participated in the OM [the Odyssey of the Mind Competition], something unhappy happened. I upset the other students and they boycotted me.[...] I hit someone [...] I reflected and felt regret afterwards. That made me change a lot. Before this incident, I was rather rigid and cared a lot about money. Before the competition, we had to work until late at school, we had to buy take-aways for dinner and one person paid the bill first. [...] I found it was me who always had to pay more. I felt upset about it. [...] This made me reflect a lot and I've changed a lot since then. I no longer care about money anymore and

in fact I've become very generous... I don't want my friendships to be affected because of money.

Within Theme 1 (Friendship Needs), participants' narratives show that their interactions with their school friends both fulfilled and were either purposefully or unintentionally driven by different practical, emotional and personal needs. These needs ranged from the everyday practical needs for having a working partner when conducting the required academic and school activities, to having emotional support from a companion during non-structured school times who shared the fun and stresses either of being an ordinary student similar to others or, more particularly, who shared the experiences of academic high-achieving students in a competitive school environment. Although most of the participants did not specifically focus on intrinsic personal development when they formed friendships and socialised with their school friends, many of them felt that their school friends helped them to actualise their potential and that because of their friendship experiences they developed their values and became who they are today. It is important to note that although an overall theme of needs can be established in the participants' accounts, their narratives also show that their needs were varied and that there were intra-personal discrepancies and even contradictions in the nature of their friendship needs, and in when and how their needs were satisfied.

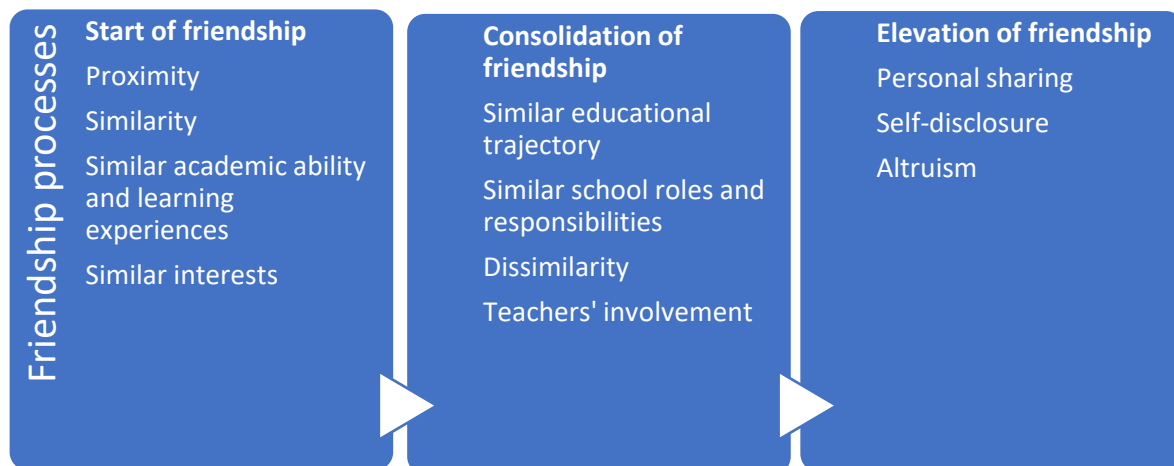
Theme 2

4.2 Friendship processes: similarity, shared activities and educational trajectory, intimacy and altruism

The second theme formed based on the participants' narratives of their school friendships is the different stages of friendship: start, consolidation and elevation of friendship. In relation to this process, various influential elements were mentioned by the participants. Some of these elements presented under Theme 2 are closely related and in some cases overlapping with their needs for friendship as mentioned under Theme 1. This demonstrated that satisfying one's needs is either a purpose or an unintentional outcome of having friends. In the processes of their friendship development, although subject to individual contextual differences, similarity appeared to pave the way to friendship, while other factors including personal uniqueness, or to an extent, dissimilarity, personal sharing, self-disclosure, altruism and teachers all played a

role in contributing to the development of friendship. Figure 4.2 shows the three stages in friendship processes and their contributing factors.

Figure 4.2 Friendship processes



4.2.1 Start of friendship

The participants reported that at least one of their school friends was a classmate who sat near them in class and with whom they shared similarities in certain aspects of learning or in other interests.

Proximity

Most of the participants' school friendships began with proximity. Dora, Mary, Jeff, Joe, Jason, Tom and Billy all reported that their first friends in secondary school were the classmates sitting near them or allocated to the same learning groups. Such proximity was very much pre-determined by the school class allocation mechanism which was either based on students' academic abilities or teachers' arrangements. One example of friendship caused by proximity was Dora who made friends first with Ping, her neighbour in class before their friendship circle extended outwards from where she and Ping sat in the classroom.

(1st interview) Dora: The ones I got close because we sat near each other, in front of me, next to me...so we got close. It happened gradually [...] I started befriending with the one sitting

next to me, and she was also a friend of the one sitting in front of us. In this way, we got a bigger circle.

Although teachers usually made seating arrangements for the students in junior years, in the senior years, students were usually allowed to choose where to sit in the classroom. In this case, proximity could also be a matter of choice. Sitting together was a factor in either forming a friendship or sustaining it. In Joe's and Billy's experiences, as they were allowed to sit wherever they liked in the senior years, they deliberately chose to sit with someone who they had already formed a friendship with. Joe chose to sit with his friend because they were both class monitors, so sitting together facilitated their collaboration. Such proximity with their friends sustained their interactions and therefore consolidated their friendship. Joe's narrative shows a cyclical relationship between friendship and proximity.

(1st interview) Joe: Maybe the classmate sitting next to me... Maybe one thing was we were both class monitors so it was more convenient that we sat together to handle class affairs. Also, he was my very good friend. [...] We chose our seats.

Proximity was crucial in Jason's and Don's friendship development in school as their physical mobility was limited by their health issues. They normally stayed in their classrooms for most part of a school day. The students who were assigned by their homeroom teachers to sit next to Jason and Don took up a role as helpers to assist them in their daily routine. In Jason's case, this helper-friend stayed close to him in most lessons and was described by Jason as a friend who knew how to strike a good balance between offering timely assistance and socialising as equals. Both Don and Jason maintained strong friendships with these neighbour-helper-friends after leaving school.

(2nd interview) Jason: I had to sit in the front of the classroom because I needed the special desk and chair. Peter was seated next to me in all these years in senior secondary. We did maths and physics together. He knew when to help me and when not to help me. [...] It should be on an equal basis.

(1st interview) Don: (Asked about how he made friends when he repeated S5 after his recovery) It was mainly those who sat near me so we chatted more. [...] As time went by, we got closer.

After three turbulent years and experiencing poor peer relationships in his first three years at secondary school, Tom was allocated into a class in which he sat in close proximity with his

best friend and other friendly classmates. This arrangement created a conducive environment for his friendship development in senior years. Tom reported that his peer relationship improved in S4 as he was in a class with his best friend and they were arranged to sit together in the classroom while his former “enemy” was allocated to another class. He thought that it was a deliberate arrangement made by teachers to create more harmonious peer dynamics between him and Ken as well as with other good-natured and similarly academically-driven schoolmates.

(1st interview) Tom: I reckon that there must be some rationale behind the class allocation in S4. It must have been tampered with artificially [...] Sometimes some deliberate adjustment to let students who are friends be in the same class, to form good learning atmosphere will lead to good exam results [...] When we focused on learning, the things we talked about were more sensible.

Similar academic ability and learning experiences

While being physically close seemed to be the prerequisite for having more opportunities to socialise and make friends, similarities in academic abilities, academic and non-academic interests and personality were also factors which contributed to the participants developing friendships with their schoolmates. Due to the ability-based school banding and class allocation mechanisms in most Hong Kong mainstream schools, students are likely to study in the same school or the same class with students who have similar academic abilities. Many participants felt that they had more common topics for discussions with schoolmates who were similar in their academic ability, learning attitude and academic performance.

(1st interview) (When asked what qualities were important for him to make good friends) Chan: They should have shared topics of discussion with me academically. They were willing to join in my academic discussion. Secondly, our thinking and values should be in common. If we had different values, there would be unhappy experiences when having a discussion.

(1st interview) Jason: Maybe I inclined to make friends with students who studied well because I had better school results. I was in a so-called higher ability class, so my social circle was more with classmates who had better academic results and I was not familiar with schoolmates in other classes as we didn't have much chance to interact. When we studied together, we could discuss academic topics and there were more interactions.

Another reason why some participants preferred making friends with schoolmates of similar academic ability is that they were sensitive to the tensions of being academic high achievers. Jeff was very conscious about the “social class” culture in his school which was formed based on students’ academic status. He felt that some schoolmates befriended him in order to gain academic support from him. Conversely, Chan was aware that some less academically able schoolmates might be intimidated by his academic prestige. Therefore, while they felt they could have more topics for discussions with equally academically strong friends, they also felt more relaxed in front of these friends, so they could be free from the stigma and tension derived from being regarded as academic high achievers in front of less able peers.

(1st interview) Jeff: ... I feel that in my school, the social class was defined by academic achievements. You only chat with a certain group of people and know that group of people better. Then we became friends. There were three types of people I didn’t want to make friends with at all: those who tried to please me, those who wanted to take advantages from me and those who didn’t want to interact with me as they found me too strong [...] The most able schoolmates I knew [...] they treated others with a true heart. One or two of them were really genuine friends.

(1st interview) Chan: As I was always the one who got good academic results in school, if I debated with those who had poorer academic results or those I didn’t know very well, they might feel that I thought they were stupid. That was why I didn’t dare to discuss with these people. But with friends, even when their academic results were not the same as mine, they wouldn’t mind.

Similar interests

Apart from possessing similar academic ability and learning attitude, the participants also shared similar non-academic interests or leisure activities with their friends. Although these participants took their own studies very seriously, they all enjoyed non-academically related leisure pastimes. Engaging in these pastimes with friends sharing similar interests, for example in sports, pop music, electronic games or movies, helped them relax and these leisure interactions consolidated their friendships.

(2nd interview) Dora: When I was promoted to S4, we had a lot to do, prefects, peer counsellors, big sisters, chairman of the English Association, committee members, designing display

boards, exhibitions. [...] We also played badminton, watched other schoolmates play volleyball, basketball and football. [...] I did all these with these friends, those who had the same interests.

To Don or Jeff, having a similar interest in music was crucial in their friendship experiences. Before he got ill, many of Don's school friends were fellow members of the school orchestra. When Don returned to school after a year of being absent for health reasons, he was allocated to a new class in which the students were one year younger than him. In an unfamiliar class, his initial connection with the classmates was with the fellow members of the music society that he had first met in the junior years. Similarly, Jeff also formed a strong cross-year group friendship with a schoolmate a year older than him as they were both leading members in the music team and in the Physics Olympiad.

(1st interview) (Asked about how he made friends when he repeated S5) Don: I didn't know many of them at first. Maybe just two or three, who were in the music team. So I knew them a bit. Then through them, I met other classmates and we began to know each other better.

(1st interview) Jeff: Pun and I were both in the Orchestra. In S3, I was arranged to take part in the Physics Olympiad. So we started to know each other better. In S4, [...] Pun was the chairperson of the Music Society.

4.2.2 Consolidation of friendship

The participants found it easier to make friends with schoolmates who were similar to them. However, not all these new friends could continue to stay close or share similar experiences as their qualities or circumstances might change with time. These changes were particularly obvious in the transitional period from junior secondary to senior secondary. Some of the participants such as Billy, Ken, Jeff, Mary and Don were unable to maintain the friendships they formed at an earlier stage due to changes in their social circles, academic interests, hobbies, class allocation and personality or personal maturity in puberty. On the contrary, with the school friends who continued to share similar school trajectories and personal experiences, their friendships remained stable and might get stronger even when they were aware of the emergence of their own individuality in the latter stage of adolescence. In these participants' experiences, similarity, especially in their educational goals and experiences rather than in

individual personal attributes or family backgrounds, continued to be a crucial factor in sustaining a school friendship. However, it is worth noting that although all the participants seemed to agree that they made friends more easily with schoolmates who were similar to them, Ken, Tom and Joe also mentioned that their friendship experiences were enriched by their friends' individual differences.

Similar educational trajectory

To many of these participants, academic study - in particular, preparation for university education - was the most important goal of their secondary education. The senior secondary school years when they studied exam subjects and prepared for the HKDSE exams and university admissions were a crucial stage of their student life. In this crucial stage, friends who took the same educational path, that is taking the same HKDSE exam subjects, or applying for the university programmes, were their close allies in secondary school. On the contrary, the friendships they made in junior school years with people who were unable to share their educational path in the senior years faded as they were no longer connected - neither environmentally nor emotionally. Billy talked about how his friendships with friends who did not study the same exam subjects ended.

(1st interview) Billy: My friends... I could make friends with all people. But whether I could have a friendship depended on whether we had something similar, similar in everything [...] Actually those who became my closest friends were of similar academic abilities to mine. In S4 and S5 we were allocated into different classes. Those who were once my closer friends but not so capable were no longer my classmates. So we were not as close as before.

To maintain a long-term friendship, Jason commented that having a shared learning target and trajectory was crucial.

(2nd interview) Jason: To me, in secondary school, there was a group of friends I had that we stayed together to work hard, study and exchange ideas, even until today. [...] My former school friends shared similar interests and thoughts, and we had the same target in the public exams, and we worked hard together. We went through a lot together in a long period of time.

For Chan, the public exam was considered the biggest challenge. The classmate-friends who were studying for the same exam subjects for university admissions were his best friends as they had to go through the same educational journey.

(1st interview) Chan: I think they should be the ones who face the difficulties in the secondary school life together. The biggest difficulty in secondary school was the DSE exam. So the people who had a lot of interaction during the period when preparing for the DSE exam were likely to be my friends.

Similar school roles and responsibilities

While some participants had their school friends as co-workers in school teams, and thus their friends satisfied their practical needs of school collaboration, their similar leadership roles and experiences enriched their friendship development in a personal and emotional way: Their narratives show that there was a reciprocal relationship between the participants' school roles and their friendships: participants made friends with teammates who shared school roles with them, and in some cases they and their existing friends chose to take up school roles alongside each other. As they carried out their leadership duties, their similarity with their fellow team-member friends increased and this led to better mutual understanding and having more common topics for discussion and interaction. In many cases, their conversations started from their school leadership duties and extended to casual, personal interactions beyond their school roles. For example, Chan, Billy and Joe and their friends took up similar leadership roles in school teams. They supported each other in performing their school duties and they shared their thoughts about the difficulties they encountered in their work. These shared school experiences created a sense of companionship which strengthened their friendship.

(1st interview) Billy: About my secondary school life, in secondary school, I had a lot of time to hang out with friends after school or did some sort of ECAs, such as in Careers and Life Planning Team, those things... when doing these things, there were always a large group of people or friends who worked together.

(1st interview) Chan: At first, we worked at some events such as swimming galas. After the events, we had lunch together and as we were in the same class and he had more friends, we had lunch together and had a chat. That was how it started. Then in S5, we became core members and we organised activities. So there were more chances to get together for discussions. We therefore had more topics to talk about.

Dissimilarity

Although most participants said that their friends shared similar academic and non-academic qualities and contexts with them, participants such as Joe, Ken, Chan and Mary recognised that dissimilarities in personality or interests existed in their friendships, even with their close friends. For instance, the positive influence of individual uniqueness is illustrated in Chan's narrative about his friendship with a close friend who was active and sociable while he considered himself as passive and introvert. Chan saw their individual differences as a benefit in their friendship as he thought his friend's proactive role in their friendship compensated for his own passiveness and therefore helped Chan to develop friendships with this close friend and other schoolmates.

(1st interview) (Asked about whether he and his friends had similar personalities) Chan: It had to be my opposite, especially Yuen. He was a very sociable person who liked inviting others to play ball games or have a meal. I was usually the one being invited. If my friends had the same personality as mine, being used to being invited, there would be very little chance to hang out with others. So Yuen was usually the more active one. He invited me more often and so we had more chances to chat.

The possibility of individual differences increasing attractions and of there being a mutual compensatory effect between two different schoolmates was particularly obvious in the friendship between Tom and Ken. Tom and Ken, as they themselves admitted, were two adolescents who had very different personal qualities. However, it was their dissimilarities that drew them together. In S1 when they did not know each other at all, Ken was curious about Tom as he was seen as a student with unique characteristics. Ken admitted that his curiosity for the unknown drove him to make a conscious effort to break the ice with Tom. In order to have a common topic of conversation, although he was not interested in Maths, he lied that he was interested in calculus as he knew Tom was mathematically gifted.

(1st interview) Ken: I felt he was a very special person so I wanted to know more about him. I started with asking about Mathematics. He was very strong at Maths. My mum was a math teacher. So I asked my mum about some maths theories and I used these topics to break the ice with Tom. I told him I knew calculus, but actually I didn't (laughs). And he said: Ah! You know calculus. Then we started.

Tom was an all-round academic high achiever since early childhood, but Ken did not think of himself as a high achiever in junior secondary school and had a rather playful and relaxed

attitude to learning. Tom was attracted to Ken as Tom felt that Ken's cheerfulness and sense of humour compensated his own emotional inadequacy.

(1st interview) Tom: I was happy because I saw Ken laugh. Ken knew how to laugh but I'm the sort of person who doesn't know how to laugh.

The benefits Ken brought to Tom were multiple. First of all, Ken's mature social skills practically helped Tom to solve his interpersonal problems with other classmates. Furthermore, Ken's lively and adventurous disposition influenced Tom to take a brave first step to venture out of his comfort zone of familiarity, to take part in his first ever overnight camping experience. In the camp, Tom was willing to stay up late outdoors in the dark to listen to Ken when he shared his passion on insects with his classmates. These experiences became Tom's happiest memories of his school life.

(1st interview) Tom: Because he (Ken) knew a lot about insects, he told us which one was which that night in the camping site. [...] I saw him laugh happily, then I laughed too. This might sound strange. It was because he laughed so I was happy. I actually wasn't interested in insects!

Teachers' involvement

One unintended focus of discovery about the factors that contributed to these participants' school friendships was teachers' involvement. Many participants' narratives show that their teachers had a significant role in facilitating and sustaining their friendships with schoolmates. For example, as mentioned in Theme 1, Tom, Don and Jason were arranged by teachers to sit close to classmates who became their good friends. Ken also said that in his stressful and eventful friendship with Tom, he gained strength to maintain his friendship with Tom when he received explicit encouragements from teachers. He reckoned that these teachers' words of praise and encouragement were more powerful than the acknowledgement from his peers.

(2nd interview) Ken: Teachers' encouragement, verbal encouragement, say in my friendship with Tom, I sometimes wasn't so motivated. Some of his behaviour could make me feel unhappy, such as sneezing. [...] There were times out of carelessness, he upset me a lot. But teachers' comments and recognition, such as telling me I had helped Tom a lot and I was very good, were motivation for me to keep doing it, even when there were obstacles in our friendship. The role of teachers is irreplaceable. Classmates might have said the same thing,

but when teachers said I was good, it was not the same. Teachers had a special role and it had an impact on me.

Mary's contrasting friendship experiences in her junior years and senior years also highlighted the importance of teachers in facilitating school friendships. In the beginning of S1, as teachers required students to do group work but allowed them to form their own groups, Mary's feeling of isolation was accentuated by the experience of her being left without a group and forming a group with the two remaining girls. She commented that if the teachers had exercised some degree of management of grouping arrangements, such negative friendship experiences might have been avoided. Fortunately, in her senior years studying in a class taught by teachers who took a more positive role in encouraging an inclusive class culture, Mary experienced very positive friendship dynamics and enjoyed a happy school life. She attributed this to the teachers' wisdom as they tactfully created chances to highlight students' individual strengths and offered opportunities for students of all abilities to take up class duties. These efforts facilitated friendships among all classmates of different characteristics.

(2nd interview) I remember the Chinese teacher always tried to praise these boys. [...] The teacher always managed to find some way to interact with the boy and extended it into a class discussion on Chinese history. It was the wisdom of the teacher who brought up the not so abnormal side of this boy to other classmates and provided chances for us to admire this boy's strengths. [...] Other classmates could notice these boys were also with high abilities but maybe in different areas. These interactions in lessons already created a kind of normalisation and acceptance. Also, I feel when doing groupwork, if teachers allowed students to have total freedom in finding their groupmates - if they only say let's form groups of four - there would be situations of forming cliques. My feeling of being isolated came from these grouping incidents [in S1].

4.2.3 Elevation of friendship

When the participants formed a stable and secure relationship with their friends in terms of the frequency of their socialising with one another each day or each week, the extent of their interactions and the depth of the academic exchanges and activities they engaged in with their friends, some of these participants developed a recognition of their friends as very special people in their life. Many participants recognised that the friends they regarded as good friends

or close friends were the ones with whom they could share details about their personal lives and their thoughts and feelings. To some participants such as Mary, Ken and Tom, the best friendships involved mutual altruism.

Personal sharing

Most of the participants reported that they enjoyed engaging in either academic or non-academic leisure activities with their friends. Their narratives show that although they did not consciously look for opportunities for more intimate personal sharing with their school friends, their interactions in activities naturally created opportunities for more personal and emotional interactions. An interesting point mentioned by almost all the participants was their interactions during lunch breaks with their friends. Although it might seem like an insignificant everyday routine, it was interesting that almost all participants highlighted having lunch together with their friends as an essential, relaxing and enjoyable part of their school life. Many of them used the lunch hour as a chance to share their personal thoughts with their friends in a relaxing and non-academic atmosphere.

Joe: We also had lunch together and we talked about our situations. We chatted about something more relaxing during lunch, not related to academic. Maybe we talked about what we did in the school clubs and function teams.

The participants who made use of their lunch time as a conduit for relaxing and sharing tended to form stronger friendships with their schoolmates. However, intimacy between the friends only seemed to be achieved if they were engaged in a high-quality conversation during lunch. This interesting dynamic was reported by Ken who had lunch with Tom and another classmate every day. Although they were in the same class and saw each other every day, when they had lunch, they only ate quickly and returned to the classroom as soon as possible without talking about anything personal. Without much personal sharing, although this classmate had offered considerable academic assistance to Ken, Ken did not regard him as a friend.

Ken: I didn't see him as my friend. We didn't know each other very well... We had lunch together, but not so much as friends. But we played chess sometimes.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure as mentioned in Theme 1 as one of the strategies in satisfying the participants' emotional needs, it is therefore an indispensable element in the friendship process. Ken's narrative above shows that sharing personal thoughts was a crucial indicator of level of

friendship. Participants such as Billy, Mary, Jeff and Ken valued sharing their inner thoughts with their friends, seeing this as a means to build trust and mutual understanding. When their acts of self-disclosure were considered as open, true, non-self-interest motivated and reciprocal, their sense of closeness - or as Mary and Billy put it, intimacy - increased. They said that their sense of intimacy was enhanced when they felt that their friends were willing to listen to them, showed understanding and took their issues and feelings as their own priority. For example, as discussed in the previous section, Jeff confided to Lai some of his “darker thoughts” which troubled him because of his religious faith. In the process of self-disclosure of private thoughts, Jeff emphasized the importance of non-judgemental empathetic listening from his close friend.

(1st interview) Jeff: Lai was a good listener. When I had many questions especially when I was in S5, I had problems in the Prefect Team. There were some internal, darker issues which involved a lot of competition or unhappy encounters. Not many people could share with me. But Lai was willing to listen to me [...] I knew he understood me; I felt happy... I had quite a lot of emotional issues. My family knew but they couldn't give me many suggestions. But Lai could listen and give me suggestions. I felt he understood what I was concerned about.

Similarly, Mary's closest friendship with a classmate in the senior years was founded on their shared religious faith. Self-disclosing her inner thoughts and her most vulnerable feelings built up intimacy between Mary and her friend. Mary stressed that this friend was willing to listen to her and would take Mary's problems as her priority.

(2nd interview) Mary: She was very willing to listen to me and I felt she was trustworthy. I was willing to tell her a lot. So the more we talked, we prayed together and we became closer friends...

In the act of self-disclosure, mutuality was considered crucial. Jeff thought it had to be a two-way process. Although he valued his best friends for being good listeners, he also thought it was crucial for him to be a good listener for his friends.

(2nd interview) Jeff: Making friends is a two-way process. If it was only you talking about things, it wasn't a friendship. You could have just called to a phone-in radio show. It is important that this is a process of understanding oneself and helping others. Of course, I couldn't know all my friends in-depth. I tried to let them talk about what they wanted to say.

Although Ken valued the reciprocal sharing of thoughts with a good friend, when Ken was asked how Tom's unique and usually non-personal way of communication could facilitate self-disclosure, Ken's answer suggests his double standard and complexities when evaluating his friendship with Tom and other schoolmates who might be regarded as less special.

(1st interview) (Asked about his general definition of a good friend) Ken: To me, whether a person is a friend depends on how open I can be to him in my life and how willing I am to share my thoughts and my life with this person, whether I would send him messages on ordinary days.

(1st interview) (Asked about whether Tom shared his inner thoughts with him) Ken: I tried to share my thoughts with him but normally he didn't give me much feedback. Yes, maybe the definition of friendship is how much I am willing to give in the relationship. Although he didn't give me much feedback, I felt our relationship was good and I was willing to devote more to this relationship so I saw him as a friend. I wanted him to know about my thoughts and feelings. I believe he received my ideas, but usually he didn't show he had much feedback to give (laughs).

Ken's double standard was further complicated by his view on school friendships and his distinctions of friends and soulmates. Although he admitted that he did not have a soulmate in school, he was already satisfied with the close friendships he experienced with his school friends, especially with Tom.

(2nd interview) Ken: If two people who are colleagues or co-workers, they do a project together, they have the same target. But friends interact more with their hearts. However, I do not define someone as a friend who must share very inner feelings or thoughts, those would be defined as soulmates. In secondary school, to be honest, I didn't have a very close soulmate. But I had friends.

The participants' desire for striking a balance between dependence and independence from their friends was also shown in the extent and topics of their self-disclosure. While some participants mentioned their satisfying experiences of self-disclosure to their school friends, Jason and Chan however made it clear that they did not disclose or chose to disclose selectively to their friends. For Jason, establishing an intimate relationship with his friends might contradict with his desire to keep his health problems secret. In order to maintain a balance

between these two conflicting needs, he engaged in academic and leisure activities – for example academic exchanges, playing group online games and sharing Japanese animations. He avoided revealing his inner personal feelings about his health issues and tried to conceal most parts of his personal routine from others.

(1st interview) Jason: Somehow out of pride, I didn't actively present myself to others, somehow, it was because of my conservative mindset, not wanting to let others know too much about me. And to avoid opening myself to others so that not so many people know about me.

As discussed in the previous section, not disclosing his personal self was a strategy for him to protect his privacy, distance himself from his disability and achieve a sense of equality with his friends. Therefore, in Jason's case, friendships with his schoolmates were maintained by limited self-disclosure.

Interestingly, a similar attitude towards selective or limited self-disclosure was also adopted by Jason's close friend Chan. As discussed previously, Chan did not feel that other people, including his close friends, could understand him entirely. Although he liked knowing about how other people think, he himself did not feel the need to disclose his inner feelings to others. He said that concealing his feelings was necessary to avoid becoming the subject of attempts at psychoanalysis by his schoolmates.

(2nd interview) Chan: I liked listening to him (Jason) as it was a bit about psychology. I like analysing other people's ways of thinking to guess what he was thinking. I liked listening to his views and thinking. When I was listening to his personal ideas, I tried my best to figure out his real thinking and hoped to give him some positive response. This would be the reason why I didn't like telling people about my personal matters. Maybe unconsciously I felt that I liked figuring out other people's thinking, so when I told other people my ideas, they would try to figure out my thinking and I didn't like it. But I like figuring out others' thinking.

In comparing what Chan said about not wanting to reveal his thoughts to others whereas Ken hoped to have his own feelings and ideas understood by his friends, it is interesting to see how complex and varied the needs and manifestation of self-disclosure were among these unique individuals.

Altruism

In the narratives about their best friendships, some participants highlighted that the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a friend was an important element of a good friendship. They offered help to their friends out of altruism. For example, Billy volunteered to help his friends in running for the Student Council election when he saw his friends overloaded although he was not interested in the election himself.

(1st interview) Billy: When he was running for the Student Council, he seemed very busy, having a lot to do. Those 12 people sometimes had problems and they needed others to help. So I helped them. Some design work, checking their writing...just a volunteer.

Through knowing that their friends were willing to take their problems seriously and care for them at the expense of their own welfare, they recognised the faithfulness and loyalty of their friends. This mutual altruism was demonstrated in the special friendship between Ken and Tom. When asked about what was most special about his friendship with Tom, the first and foremost idea Ken said was, in his own word, “sacrifice”. He described that a large part of their friendship involved his sacrifice of time and opportunities for making friends with other schoolmates because of his determination of maintaining his close friendship with Tom.

(1st interview) Ken: I have sacrificed for him. One thing was that I sacrificed the time I could get along with other schoolmates or friends. In secondary school years, I spent a lot of time with this friend. But this friend didn't have many friends and many classmates didn't accept him... So spending more time with him meant I had little time with my other friends. So when I reflect now, I had fewer chances to make friends with others. But I don't feel regret. It was a very special experience. I could live the same stage of life again.

In this dyadic relationship, although Tom appeared to be less proactive and less responsive, and he even claimed that friends were “non-essential goods” and he chose to make friends with those who were useful to him, Tom seemed to value Ken’s friendship at a far more intrinsic and altruistic level. In contradiction to his pragmatic view on friendship, he admitted that he would be willing to make sacrifices for Ken even when his own welfare would be negatively affected. His final remarks in the interview show how important Ken was to him as a good friend.

(1st interview) Tom: That's why there were two considerations of having friends. The first one is to make my life better, this was a main reason I wanted friends in school. But only Ken was

beyond this consideration. At the crucial moments, I would have given up my own revision time to help him get his things done. It was only Ken.

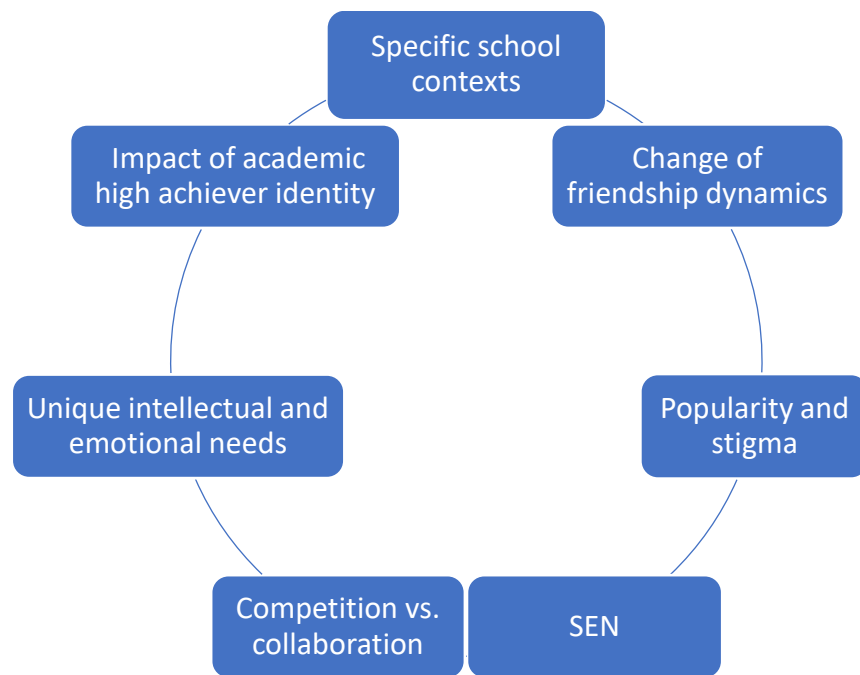
Theme 2 (Friendship Processes) focuses on the developmental nature of the friendship experiences of the participants, which were broadly divided into three stages from the start of a friendship, to how it was maintained into a long-term relationship and how it was elevated into a high quality close friendship. In these stages, various factors contributed to a friendship's success or failure. It was generally the case that most of these participants found their potential school friends due to proximity and similarities. However, for the further development of their friendship, these participants and their friends could deepen their connections and affiliation when they experienced a similar education trajectory. Some participants engaged with their school friends in academic and leisure activities or leadership responsibilities. By doing so, they secured their bond with their friends. In higher quality friendships, some participants' narratives show that personal sharing, self-disclosure, altruism and teachers' involvement were elements which facilitate the sustaining and elevation of friendship.

Theme 3

4.3 Personal and contextual factors of academic high achievers' friendship experiences in Hong Kong secondary schools

The participants' complex and rich narratives show that their academic high achiever qualities, status and characteristics were interactively related to their school friendship experiences. Theme 3 is about how the academic high achieving identity and characteristics became factors that impacted their friendship experiences. Seven aspects of these personal and contextual factors are summed up as follows:

Figure 4.3 Factors interplaying in academic high achievers' friendship experiences



4.3.1 Specific school contexts derived from high achiever status

As mentioned in the previous sections, when schools, classes and subjects were allocated based on students' academic performance, those who were academic high achievers, and were regarded by others as such, were placed into a specific school and class context which had a determining impact on their friendship experiences as either they studied with classmates who had similar academic abilities for their entire secondary education or their friendship circles changed because of moving to a more academic-oriented school or class.

Studying in a school or class with other similarly academically strong students

The participants were aware of their academic high achiever identity in different stages of schooling. The difference in the time when their academic high achiever status was confirmed had varied influences on the participants. Some of the participants studied with schoolmates of similar abilities since primary school but some of them moved from different peer groups as their high academic abilities emerged. These conditions created a specific context for them to develop school friendships. For example, because of their top exam performance in S3, Jeff, Jason, Chan, Ken, Tom, Don and Billy all studied in a class with more academically able students in senior years, and all studied M2 (an advanced Mathematics module for which only students who ranked high in S3 would be eligible). This led to a specific classroom context for friendship development with students of similar ability, interests and experiences. Tom particularly benefited from his academic status as because of this, he was allocated to the S4

class in which the classmates were more serious about learning and more sensible. As he himself was a serious student who focused on academic studies, he found it easier to make friends in classmates of similar learning attitude.

(1st interview) Tom: (in S4) The people problem was also resolved. The class allocation was random in the first three years, so I was put into a class with the people I disliked. It wasn't the case in S4, it was allocated by results. [...] When we focused on learning, the things we talked about were more sensible.

Transferring to a more academically oriented school and becoming an outsider

Mary's experience was unique as she originally studied in a non-academic tiered primary school near her home, but because of her outstanding school performance her parents chose to send her to a more prestigious fee-charging school located in a more affluent area of Hong Kong. As this secondary school had a primary-secondary direct promotion system with its own primary school section, many students in S1 had already formed their own friend circles and thus they had their own peer culture. Mary, as a newcomer, found it hard to break into these circles. She felt isolated when these classmates behaved in a way that made her feel unwelcome, isolated and ignored.

(1st interview) Mary: I was always a talkative and popular student since primary school [...] I was puzzled why I was being isolated when I got into secondary school. [...] Although I was not directly bullied by others, I somehow felt I didn't mix well, as an outsider.

Mary's narrative shows that her outstanding academic results in primary school led to a different choice of secondary school resulting in isolation and loneliness. In order to survive in the school she held onto a fragile and not very satisfying friendship with two other girls who were also newcomers, and she put all her attention into her academic learning.

(1st interview) Mary: I had no interest in taking part in any ECAs in school. I didn't have the interest to stay after school to attend any foreign language classes such as Spanish or French. I didn't have the interest to interact with others. This made my junior school life only about studying.

The outcome of her totally focusing on developing her academic strength was that she continued to obtain excellent school results especially in the subjects that were esteemed in the school as important subjects such as mathematics and the sciences. Mary then established an

academic high achiever status among the schoolmates who had previously ignored her. After that, she was no longer invisible but attracted more attention and became more popular among her classmates.

(1st interview) Mary: Yes. I recall my Maths in junior years was stronger than all the boys. They were really amazed at that time. They exclaimed that I was always so quiet and in fact I was so strong. [...] I feel in my learning environment, in general there was an unspoken understanding, that was people liked staying close with those who were academically strong. I felt they suddenly wanted to be close to me. So if you ask me how my academic performance influenced my friendships, I would say I had a feeling that having good academic results would make me more popular.

4.3.2 Change of friendship dynamics with the academic high achiever status

Ken's experience of not being aware of himself as highly academically able in his junior secondary years but then getting into an elite class and excelling academically in his senior secondary years shows a complex development of his academic high achiever identity and of its relationship with his friendship development. In the junior years, he mixed with a group of playful and less academic peers. He enjoyed leisure activities with these peers, which allowed him to have fun and made him feel happy. In the senior years, when he formed a stronger academic identity in the presence of his academically superior friends, he became more focused on his studies. This had an impact on his friendship development; as he put it, in the junior years, when he spent most of his time playing sports and electronic games with his friends, he did not have much in-depth interaction with his peers as he was focusing on playing the games rather than paying attention to the people involved. However, in the senior years, as he spent most of his time after lessons in the classroom to study, he actually made more friends as when he stayed in the classroom for longer, he had more quality time for communicating with his friends so their friendships deepened.

(2nd interview) Ken: Actually I had more friends in senior years. In junior years, maybe we only had a few friends. We played basketball or computer games together. It meant we spent a lot of time together. But when we played basketball, we didn't stay in the classroom to make other friends. In senior years, we were quieter and studied more. We stayed in the classroom

longer, more classmates were involved and we had the chance to get in touch with many more classmates.

4.3.3 Popularity and stigma of being an academic high achiever in friendship experiences

Apart from the fact that they were allocated to study with similarly academically able students and therefore developed friendships with the like-minded schoolmates, another gain from being an academic high achiever was an increase in popularity. This situation was exemplified in Mary's case, that once her academic reputation was well known in school, she attracted more attention among her peers, which resulted in her gaining higher popularity in school. Being aware of the effect of his academic status on popularity, Jeff said that that his academic high achiever identity "defined" his friendship development in school. He felt that his interpersonal relationships were determined very much by the consequential linkage of his academic high achiever identity and status.

(1st interview) Jeff: You could say it defined how I made friends. In such a position, that's very good academic results and holding many school positions, people would look up to me.

While some participants welcomed such a rise in their popularity, some participants expressed strong negative feelings about the self-interested motive behind these friendships. For example, Jeff said he disliked making friends with schoolmates who wanted to gain academic benefits from him.

(1st interview) Jeff: There were three types of people I didn't want to make friends with at all: those who tried to please me, those who wanted to take advantages from me and those who didn't want to interact with me as they found me too strong. So, those who I could befriend with, were those who didn't want to learn from me or get something from me.

Chan said that although he himself had no special feeling about his academic status, he was aware that his academic high achiever status would be a deterrent or obstacle in friendships with less able schoolmates as he believed that less able schoolmates were intimidated by his academic status.

(1st interview) Chan: Some of them felt inferior to me. I could see that there were a lot of these classmates. They felt their academic results were far behind mine, so they didn't want to hang out with me. There were these schoolmates from primary to secondary schools. So we, ourselves, didn't have this feeling, we didn't mind.

4.3.4 Academic high achievers with special educational needs (SEN) and disability

Two of the participants in this study had various special educational needs or disability. For Tom who possessed both superior academic strength and SEN, his dual characteristics posed a unique and complex influence on his friendship development. On the positive side, when Tom's academic reputation became well known in the school, he acknowledged that he was no longer solely seen as an outcast as in his junior years. Tom himself was fully aware of this change. He said that when he got excellent academic results no one challenged or judged him negatively anymore. His positive academic status was the main factor in his gaining greater social acceptance from teachers and schoolmates. Because of this, he began to enjoy harmonious peer relationships throughout his senior secondary years.

(1st interview) Tom: I heard at the time there were two sides of opinions among teachers. Some wanted me to leave and some let me stay. The latter side won and it proved that they were right because I got very good exam results for them. No one questioned the decision made at that time... If the outcome is good, no one will go back to the past and question it. When I was in the final year, no one judged me anymore. When I got good exam results, no one remembered what happened in the past.

On the negative side, however, as Tom's identity and self-esteem were solely built on his academic excellence in terms of rankings and awards, when he always used other schoolmates' achievements as his reference for his own success, he was extremely aware of the threat towards his academic status posed by some equally or more exceptional students. He was particularly anxious in the presence of exceptionally academically able students whose abilities were in the same area as his and were closely comparable to his own. As he felt his academic excellence status was under threat, therefore he defined these schoolmates as his competitors. Tom even saw one particular schoolmate as, in his own words, his life-long "enemy", whose presence triggered Tom's anxiety and suspicion.

(1st interview) Tom: We competed against each other from Mathematics Olympiad to exams. I won in the exams and he won in Maths Olympiad. [...] Indeed he was competing with me. You think he wasn't worried? He always ranked top 10 in the year. He was the only one who continuously got that in 6 years. I only got it in the last 3 years. He must have been worried. Think about it.

Jason, a student with a severe disability, had another range of special needs that had an impact on his everyday school life and interactions with his peers. As mentioned in Themes 1 and 2, Jason's friendship experiences were constrained by his mobility and the limited physical activities he could engage in. The hardship he suffered from his disability affected his emotional wellbeing and self-esteem, and this had an impact on his choice of friendships. To mediate the negative impact posed by the physical disability he had since birth, he diverted all his attention to academic learning and he managed to achieved top academic results throughout his education. Being an academic high achiever to a certain extent compensated for the losses he saw that he experienced as a student with disability.

(1st interview) Jason: My life as a student since I started school, I think my health was a main factor that affected my student life. Also, I got a lot of satisfaction in learning and studying, especially in the subjects I was good at.

(When asked about the impact of SEN on his choice of friends) Jason: somehow out of my dignity, I didn't actively present myself to others or actively make friends in the outside world. I had a habit to limit my social circle, or maybe to choose my friends strictly, to those kinder or more trustworthy to avoid other people knowing too much about my personal matters [...] a barrier between me and others, not to be reached so easily.

(When asked about the impact on his academic talents) I guess, it was my talents. When I had something that was obviously more outstanding than others. I naturally spent more time on it. Sometimes it could just be something I enjoyed, such as attending science lessons, physics, chemistry or biology. They were my real interests and I happened to be good at them. I spent a lot of time on them and got very good results in the end.

I felt a sense of success. Being better than others improved my self-esteem. It was kind of self-assurance.

4.3.5 Competition vs. collaboration

Tom's narrative could be a good example of how individual uniqueness contributed to these participants' varied and complex experiences. Tom's friend vs. enemy dichotomy in friendship development in school may have mainly been a result of his predominant reliance on his academic identity. However, as shown in the previous discussions, this kind of unhealthy competitive mindset did not appear between Jeff and Yuen or Chan and Jason, the other two pairs of academically exceptional students who managed to develop positive dyadic friendships, and who did not seem to have the same rivalry mentality. They saw their equally academic friends as their companions and teammates who worked towards the same educational aims and shared largely similar personal trajectories. Such a strong friendship between two exceptionally bright students was perhaps different from the common belief, so much so that Jeff stated that his mother was surprised by it. In this friendship of two equally exceptional students, Jeff acquired a deeper understanding of the intrinsic meaning of being an academic high achiever, which involved much more than just rankings or marks. Jeff's descriptions of the differences between his and Yuen's academic excellence show that Jeff was aware of the uniqueness of each individual high achiever and the inadequacy of an over-generalised understanding of what constitutes an academic high achiever.

(2nd interview) Jeff: Yuen and I were really good friends. It was funny that my mother also asked why Yuen and I were not fierce competitors, but we shared a lot instead. I think we understood our own strengths and tried to help each other. I feel Yuen was an all-rounder and I was strong at certain things but weak in a few areas. People said I may be exceptionally gifted in a few areas and Yuen was strong in all areas but not ultra-exceptional.

4.3.6 Unique intellectual and emotional needs resulting from academic superiority

The participants' superior academic abilities and their desire to excel in academic learning consciously and subconsciously influenced their everyday interactions with the people they met at school and this created various academically and intellectually driven social interactions and unique interpersonal dynamics.

The participants' narratives suggest that their intellectual interactions with friends extend beyond exam achievements and rankings. With the exception of Tom, many of the participants, having been high achievers at school and ranking top in most years, did not think that exam

rankings were most important to them. Rather, they enjoyed having high-quality intellectual exchanges with their school friends. Jeff particularly highlighted that he valued the exchange of knowledge in his friendship and he considered knowledge to be more important than exam results. He therefore also took up a tutoring role in the Physics Olympiad as he found the passing on and exchanging of advanced knowledge was enjoyable and fulfilling personally and socially.

(1st interview) Jeff: I myself like to know more about knowledge. Knowledge learning is a part of learning about myself. I want to know what I want to do. This is a way to learn about myself. [...] In Secondary 4, I liked to do research and teach others. I was a Physics Olympiad tutor to teach a group of students something I liked. This helped both me and the students grow. I really like, like thinking about something and teaching others so that they understand. This feeling is very enjoyable.

I found that the friends I wanted to make had to allow knowledge interactions. It was very important to me. Without that, I wouldn't have the incentive to form an interaction with a person, it's knowledge exchange or information exchange.

It was at the Physics Olympiad training that Jeff began a friendship with one of his best friends, Pun. Pun was a year older and was the coach for Jeff's team. This cross-year friendship was built upon their intellectual similarity between an academic high achiever and an academic mentor who later also became a life coach for Jeff on personal matters.

(1st interview) Jeff: In S3, I was arranged to take part in the Physics Olympiad. So we started to know each other better. Pun was my tutor. We became close because of Physics. When I encountered that unhappy incident in S4, Pun helped me and thought of ways to solve the problem.

While Jeff and Tom found satisfaction and a sense of academic achievement by engaging in advanced mathematics or science training and competitions, not all academic high achievers had an interest in these advanced academic events. Chan and Billy did not find taking part in these academic competitions interesting or useful. Instead, they took up leadership or school responsibilities through which they developed friendships with fellow leaders.

(1st interview) (Asked whether he took part in the Mathematics Olympiad) Chan: No. I found those questions too uncommon and narrow. I found them meaningless. That was why I didn't

like taking part in it... Studying should be fun and interesting. Those topics were too uncommon and rare for the sake of being rare.

(1st interview) (Asked about what he enjoyed doing most at school) Billy: In those days, I had a lot of time hanging out with friends after school or er... or did some sort of ECAs, such as in the past the CLP (Careers and Life Planning Team), those things.[...] When doing these things, there was always a large group of people or friends who worked together

While some participants such as Jeff, Chan and Jason found equally academic or academically superior friends as their intellectual friends, some of these academically exceptional strong participants were aware of the limitations of their peers' academic knowledge. Because of this, although they admitted that they enjoyed having academic discussions with their friends, when they came across some advanced level academic questions and they knew those questions were beyond their peers' academic level, they either looked for the answers themselves or asked their teachers to have mature and advanced academic discussions. For example, Joe's preference for seeking help from teachers who could better match his academic giftedness somehow reduced his instrumental needs for same-age friendships.

(1st interview) Joe: I think the teacher was more experienced and he had taught the subject for many years. He could give me more accurate and detailed answers... because I feel that academically the teacher had studied that subject at university, he had a wider scope of knowledge.

Likewise, on the personal level, some of these exceptionally academically talented participants had some unique life events in school and in their personal lives that they felt they could not share with their friends, either because they felt that their friends would have been unable to understand them, or if they revealed their experiences and feelings it would have been awkward or embarrassing for their friends. For example, both Dora and Chan kept to themselves their feelings of frustration after the exam results were released as most of their friends' exam results were lower than theirs and so they felt that it would have been insensitive to air their grievances in front of their friends. Chan's experience of receiving too much media attention after becoming one of the top HKDSE scorers was so unusual that it created a huge gap in social experience between him and his friends, except for Jason who was also one of the top HKDSE scorers in that year. Similar to Joe who sought help from teachers when he had some advanced

learning problems, Chan also turned to his teachers to vent the emotional stress brought by such an unusual experience.

(1st interview) Chan: ...when the DSE exam results were released, there were many news reporters who wanted to interview me. I wasn't happy at that time even though I got very good exam results. The new reporters surrounded me, poking their mics to me and sending me a lot of Whatsapp messages to bombard me. So it was troublesome. But at that time, I could not find my friends to talk about it. As many of my friends didn't do very well or their scores were at the borderline, I had no reason to talk about my problems with them. That's why I found teachers to talk to. [...] Those teachers suggested some ways of positive thinking to me.

4.3.7 Diverse perceptions on the impact of academic high achiever identity

Although the above findings indicate that many participants' academic high achiever status had an impact on their friendship experiences, some participants, even while acknowledging that their academic reputation made them more popular, perceived that their academic achievements in school had no effect on their friendship experiences. Don and Ken clearly said that their friendships were not related to their academic achievements.

(1st interview) (Asked whether being a high achiever affected friendship) Don: I feel no impact... I don't think there was much different. The competition in internal exams was not so fierce. We all had our ultimate target of the public exams. So there wasn't much of a selfish motivation.

Like Don, other participants, such as Billy, Dora, Ken and Mary, clearly claimed that their friendships with schoolmates were not influenced by their academic status. They said they did not pay attention to their own or their friends' academic achievements when they befriended one another. Ken did not think being an academic high achiever had any impact on his friendships with schoolmates as he found emotional connections with friends more important than academic exchange.

(1st interview) Ken: This didn't apply to me. I never used my academic results to evaluate myself or used them as a standard. Back to the criteria I have mentioned earlier, it was about whether I felt comfortable when getting along with others. Whether I could chat and had shared topics

or interests. Then I could make friends with these people. [...] I didn't choose to make friends with those who got top academic results.

The difference between the actual impact and the perceived impact of the academic high achiever status to friendship experiences was particularly complex in Mary's accounts. On the one hand she agreed that being an academic high achiever who studied in the top set, she could make friends with those strong students from other homerooms. However, she pointed out that these environmental factors only had a minor influence on her friendship development as studying with an ability-grouped class only gave rise to more chances for making friends with students of similar ability but it did not have a major effect on the actual outcome of who she made friends with and how.

(2nd interview) Mary: About making friends, in the classes that were divided by sets, I could make friends with those who were not in my homeroom. [...] When classes were allocated based on abilities, the positive impact to my friendship development was solely about having the chance to meet these people. I feel I didn't make more friends only because I was allocated to classes based on my abilities. So, simply by not being allocated according to abilities, like in the senior years when I chose the subjects I wanted to study but the classes were not divided into different sets, I still made friends in the way I wanted.

As mentioned above, Joe sometimes felt that his friends and classmates did not have the same academic level to match his intellectual needs. He was then asked if he preferred studying only with students of high ability like him. He gave a rather sophisticated and inspiring answer:

(2nd interview) Joe: when I socialised with classmates of mixed abilities... one major element in classroom learning was the questions asked by classmates. Through the diverse questions asked by different classmates and the replies from teachers, I feel it was an effective way of learning. If the teacher only taught the textbook knowledge and covered the contents of the notes, it might not be a thorough and complete way of presenting of the topic. So the questions asked by classmates were a crucial component in learning. I feel in a class with mixed abilities, the questions would be more diverse. In a class of high academic ability, the classmates with strong ability might think they had learnt enough about the topic, but conversely, in a class of mixed abilities, some classmates might feel there were some parts of the topic they didn't understand, so they would be more eager to ask more questions.

Although some of the questions were rather basic, I still felt that even though the questions were basic, it still helped the strong students to master the topic and consolidate their foundation. When they had a good foundation, students, when they learnt something more difficult, would learn more effectively. So on the issue of asking questions, it was better to be in a class with mixed abilities. And sometimes classmates discussed about homework or tests, in a class of mixed abilities I felt there were more of this kind of discussions.

His detailed explanation shows that he was aware that being academic high achievers may also produce inadequacies and limitations in the academic high achievers' ways of thinking and learning. To Joe, such inadequacies could only be mediated by having diverse interactions and inputs with classmates of different abilities. In this sense, the deficiency of an academic high achiever triggered the need for Joe to make friends with students of lower abilities.

Theme 3 (Specific Personal and Contextual Factors) shows a collection of contextual factors that influenced the participants' school friendship experiences. Although these participants can be broadly categorised as one homogenous group as academic high achievers, their narratives reveal that personal and environmental contexts, either regardless of or in combination with their academic qualities, had significant impacts on their friendship experiences at school. These contextual factors included when they became academically outstanding and how their school choices were made before entering secondary schools, how the school or class culture created a positive or negative friendship environment, how participants perceived competition and ranking, self-identity, health issues, SEN and personality characteristics. The narratives once again display intra- and interpersonal differences in the participants' friendship experiences which highlight the individual uniqueness and complexities of their human experiences.

4.4 Conclusion

The narratives solicited from this study were the voices of the participants about their subjective experiences of these academic high achievers' school friendships. Each of these individuals' stories were complex. Their own perceptions and experiences of friendships encompassed intra- and inter-personal differences, diversity and contextuality. Among such vast and complex and at times inconsistent narratives, patterns of their experiences were identified and the three broad themes were established. The first theme showed how these

participants' instrumental needs, emotional needs, personal growth and self-actualisation were satisfied and accomplished through their school friendships. The second theme was about the friendship processes: how proximity and similarity contributed to the start of friendship; how having a similar educational trajectory, engaging in similar activities and school responsibilities and individual uniqueness consolidated friendship, and how their friendships were elevated by self-disclosure, altruism, and teachers' involvement. The third theme comprised seven contextual factors related to their academic high achiever status which influenced their friendship experiences, including specific school contexts, change of friendship dynamics, popularity and stigma, dual qualities of special educational needs and academic giftedness, unique intellectual and emotional needs, competition vs. collaboration and diverse perceptions of their academic high achiever status. These three themes demonstrated that these academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools had friendship experiences which were influenced by the complex interplay of various personal and environmental factors in their unique contexts.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

This section starts with a general overall discussion of the findings, and this is followed by a selection of specific aspects identified in the findings for further discussion with reference to existing theoretical literature and research studies. The findings provide complex and contextual answers to the research question of how the academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools experienced school friendships. In particular, the findings offer insights to three sub-questions which address the “why?”, that is why did they need friends; what needs were satisfied in their school friendships intentionally or unintentionally? “what?”, that is what did the friendship processes involve and what were the ingredients and factors contributing to their friendships? and “how?”, that is how did their high academic achiever characteristics influence their friendship experiences in the secondary schools they attended?

5.1 General discussion of the findings

The narratives presented by the participants provided rich and in-depth data which were grouped into three broad themes with specific and complex subthemes, capturing these participants’ unique experiences which shed light on the research questions of how academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary school experienced school friendships.

The first theme was the friendship needs of these academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. These needs included: instrumental/practical needs such as having a team member for doing group work with and having someone to assist them in their learning or social life at school; emotional needs such as having fun with others, companionship, a sense of security, a reduced sense of loneliness and reduced academic anxiety; and the need for self-actualisation of their own potentials and personal values through having like-minded friends who reinforced their own values, through gaining new insights from their friends by sharing personal views, or through positively competing against one another to facilitate personal growth.

The second theme that appeared in the participants’ narratives was the friendship process these participants experienced in secondary school. Most of them started their school friendships with schoolmates who were similar to them in terms of their academic, personal and social characteristics. They consolidated their friendships when they happened to or chose to follow a similar learning and personal trajectory so that they had more chances to interact with their

friends which formed a crucial prerequisite for sustaining friendships. Some of the participants managed to develop higher quality friendships when their interactions created a sense of mutual understanding, intimacy, non-judgemental listening and altruism.

The third theme was the contextual factors related to the participants' academic high achiever status and the influences of these factors on their friendship experiences. In Hong Kong, where schools are broadly categorised based on students' academic performance and dominated by the Chinese culture which places a strong emphasis on learning, the school experiences of these participants were in many ways influenced by their academic backgrounds and identity. The school system led to them being grouped with students of similar academic abilities and therefore having a higher chance to develop friendships with them. They enjoyed the companionship of school friends in their academic and personal lives but they were also aware of the reality that some students might befriend them or keep a distance from them due to their academic high achiever identity. As these high achievers had stronger academic abilities and some unique personal experiences created by their exceptionally superior academic performances, they experienced tensions in striking a balance between dependence and independence having an impact on their experiences of school friendships.

While three general broad themes were established based on certain commonalities observed in the narratives of these participants, it is worth noting that there were intra-personal and inter-personal discrepancies in these participants' friendship experiences. Although all ten participants can be grouped under a broad category of "academic high achievers" or "the academically gifted", their narratives show differences in their experiences under these three broad themes. For example, not all participants had the same friendship needs nor did they need their friends in the same circumstances. Some participants found academic exchanges more important than personal sharing of feelings; some participants did not think their friends could change their ways of thinking; some of them did not feel lonely or did not feel the need to have an intimate friend in school. One participant wanted a close and intimate friendship which involved mutual understanding and altruism but at the same time the same participant did not mind having other less intimate friends who were only playmates and teammates. One participant had two groups of friends from two different cohorts and he saw both groups as his friends but had different expectations of them. The participants' narratives highlight the personal uniqueness and contextuality in every adolescent's friendship development. These

unique experiences and contextual factors were created by their personal circumstances including health, SEN, their school contexts and environmental factors which prevailed in their social and educational settings.

While their narratives demonstrated complexity and diversity in individual experiences, there are also patterns which indicate that these ten participants' friendship experiences in secondary school seem largely to align with a positive general picture of academically gifted adolescents' friendship developments in secondary schools. All ten participants had at least one high-quality friendship. Although they acknowledged that their high academic achiever status might have some impact on their friendship development, unlike some depressing accounts given by the exceptionally academically gifted students in other research (Gross, 2004), the participants in this study did not report being more lonely or more dissatisfied in their friendships than their non-academically exceptional peers. On the contrary, many of them showed flexibility and maturity in their perceptions, expectations and handling of friendships. They had different types of friends. Some of their friends served the role of a playmate, some of them that of an intellectual friend and co-worker and some of them were their life coaches or "sure shelter" (Gross, 2004). They found it easier to make friends with schoolmates who were similar to them academically, personally and socio-demographically and yet they also recognised the positive inputs brought by school friends who were different from them. They enjoyed working and sharing academic and non-academic activities with their friends. They liked engaging in meaningful groupwork when they felt the workload was shared fairly and the task was challenging. Most of them valued positive competition with their school friends, seeing it as a means for self-evaluation and improvement. With such a positive attitude, they collaborated and competed with their friends but did not necessarily feel under pressure if they were defeated. They enjoyed companionship and a sense of closeness with their friends while maintaining some degree of academic and emotional independence (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1997).

5.2 Discussions on specific aspects of findings

In the following section, several key aspects identified in the findings are interpreted and discussed in association with several earlier seminal theoretical works in psychology and recent academic studies on friendship and gifted education studies. While adopting the theoretical assertions presented in existing literature in the discussion of this study's findings, as this

research study on the friendship experiences of high academic achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools involved a very specific social and personal context of a unique group of students in Hong Kong schools and the primary focus of this study was to present the unique experiences of the individuals through their own voices, the theoretical conceptualisations in existing literature on similar topics were referred to as initial reference or general basis for discussion of the novel and nuanced findings of this study. In the following sections, participants' friendship needs are discussed with reference to two early psychology theories: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Sullivan's idea of Chumship in his Interpersonal Theory (1953). Although these two theories have been challenged in further academic discussions in later years, the friendship experiences of the participants in this study both resonate with and differ from some of the key concepts of these two theories. Reference to these theories therefore highlights the commonalities and uniqueness of the participants' individual experiences against the wider context of friendship studies. Based on their prevalence and significance in the data, the key aspects of the participants' friendship experiences at school to be discussed below include security, love and sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, chumship, homophily, altruism, loneliness and intimacy, and high ability grouping or mixed ability grouping.

5.2.1 Friendship Needs

To explore the friendship needs of the academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools, the first sub-question of this study is to learn more about what needs were satisfied in the friendship experiences of the individuals. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs postulates that people's motivation is driven by five different levels of needs, hierarchically progressing from basic physiological needs and security through social needs such as love, family and belonging, esteem needs such as achievement and self-worth, and ultimately the need for self-actualization in the sense of self-aware personal growth (Maslow, 1943). Although Maslow's theory does not specifically focus on adolescent friendships, the participants' narratives in this study show that the participants' experiences of school friendships resonate with the needs encompassed in Maslow's theory but their needs might not be in the same order nor did all the participants need their friends to fulfil all these five levels of needs. These findings echo Neher's and Alderfer's critiques of Maslow's theory (Neher, 1991, Alderfer, 1969). Alderfer's ERG model revised Maslow's theory and suggests that existence, relatedness, and growth needs are

dynamically related and do not necessarily require an ordering among them (Poulou & Norwich, 2018). In this research, the findings show that the participants' friendship needs might not have been as hierarchical as suggested in Maslow's model and they might have satisfied different needs from the same friend at different times or different needs from different friends at the same time. Among all these needs, either suggested by Maslow or by Alderfer, their needs for security, love and sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation were closely related to their school friendship experiences. These specific needs are discussed under the following sub-headings.

Security

Maslow's theory states that security needs must be taken care of before growth and positive experience become predominant needs. This claim was supported in Sheldon et al.'s (2001) findings. In this study, some participants' accounts suggest that sense of security was a crucial factor in their school experiences, especially for those whose physical security was at risk due to their personal conditions. For example, in Jason's narrative, we learnt that his desire to protect his life from the health risks posed by his disability and to create a secure school environment was a determining force in his selection of and interactions with school friends. He chose friends who were kind and more academically-oriented so that he could feel confident that these friends would not trespass into his personal health issues and he could lead a less physically challenging social life by only engaging in sedentary academic or social activities confined to his home classroom or in his home. Having a sense of security was also important to Tom whose troubling experiences in junior secondary had led to frequent verbal and physical confrontations with his peers which in many cases put his safety at risk. Through Tom's close and stable friendship with Ken who served as his faithful companion and a mediator between him and his enemy, Tom could feel secure in the hostile school environment. The participants' narratives support the Maslowian postulation that sense of security is fundamental to a person's personal and social development.

Love and sense of belonging

In Poulou and Norwich's (2018) study, the adolescent participants rated relatedness with teachers and peers as important needs with slightly higher ratings given to needs for peers' relatedness with peers. In the current study, the social need for love and a sense of belonging to a dyadic friendship or a friendship circle was prevalent in all participants' narratives. They felt their friendships with their classmates or with fellow members of school teams, and more

intimate close friendships with at least one of their schoolmates, were sources of their sense of connectedness with the school community. When they engaged in academic and extra-curricular activities with their school friends, the aim was not merely to get practical gains, as most of them said they did not need much practical help from others, but to gain a sense of affiliation and companionship. Billy said that he voluntarily became actively involved in several school team duties for the sake of being with his close friend. The sense of companionship that Dora experienced was a strong motivation for her to attend school. She said although she preferred studying by herself and her school did not have many collaborative learning activities assigned by teachers, the companionship of a stable friendship circle increased her eagerness to attend school so much that she disliked having the long summer holidays. Such comments were echoed by Tom who said Ken was the motive for him to go to school every day as he knew Ken would have been concerned about him if he had been absent. He also said that it was because he felt Ken was concerned about him and he knew Ken was tormented by the fight between Tom and his enemy that he changed his behaviour towards his enemy and managed to lead a relatively harmonious social life at school. Such sense of love and care from friends was even more crucial to Don in his battle with cancer and his adaptation to a new class when he resumed schooling. The findings show that love and sense of belonging from a same sex friend was important to these academic high achieving adolescents. Unlike the claim made by Sullivan (1953) that romantic relationships with the opposite sex would replace same-sex friendships in adolescence, in this study the participants who studied either in same sex schools and co-educational schools all self-reported that they formed a loving and caring friendship with at least one schoolmate. This shows the continuous importance of the love and care offered by a same sex friend in adolescence.

Esteem and self-esteem

Maslow's theory (1943) asserts that apart from love and care, esteem, as a sense of being respected and appreciated, is also a fundamental emotional need. Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as either a favourable or unfavourable attitude toward oneself which functions as an affective evaluation of the self. This attitude may be shaped by an individual's perception of how he or she is regarded by others and vice versa and thus while esteem and self-esteem are distinct, they are related. Among different factors, friendship is considered to have a crucial impact on an adolescent's esteem and self-esteem. In a study about the relationship of Friendship Quality to Self-Esteem in early adolescence (Keefe & Berndt, 1996), it was found that the quality and stability of adolescents' friendships are related to their self-esteem. In this

study, these academic high achievers attained a higher regard for themselves when they had high quality stable friendships in which they were appreciated and respected. Some of them had their friends as partners in academic work and school responsibilities. Through these partnerships, when offering and receiving mutual support they could feel appreciated by another person and could also ascertain their personal strengths and identity. In this research, the participants' experiences of collaboration with and validation from their peers and their perceptions of how these affected their esteem and self-esteem were in line with Keefe and Berndt's findings. For example, Mary felt more secure and certain about her own charisma in the senior years when she had a close and intimate friend in the class who stood by her whenever she was in need emotionally and academically. She said because of having this good friend, she became more certain about her own charisma and therefore felt more confident about who she was. For Chan and Jeff, their esteem needs were satisfied through their academic and leadership interactions with their friends. Engaging in friendly and open academic discussions, Chan's self-confidence did not seem dependent on his identity as a top exam scorer. Rather, he believed that less academically able students would think that he was arrogant. Chan felt more respected in friendly competition with peers of similar ability to his own. Therefore, he could abandon the pressure of ranking, focus on his quest for knowledge and improvement, and gain more confidence in his own ability. Jeff experienced a similar process of self-understanding and subsequently developing stronger self-esteem through his friendship with Yuen, who was appointed by the school to take up the Head Boy title while Jeff was the Deputy Head Boy, as he learnt to appreciate and accept his own strengths and weaknesses through his interactions with Yuen. Through having these positive but competitive interactions with friends, these academic high achievers developed a more mature and relaxed view about achievements. One unique feature of these academic high achieving adolescents' self-esteem development is that their self-esteem was reinforced through not just gaining awards or some extrinsic school achievements but instead through abandoning the burden of external recognition, and intrinsically recognising and evaluating their own abilities and qualities.

Self-actualization

Self-actualization in Maslow's theory is regarded as the ultimate level of need that drives human behaviour. A study conducted by Lewis (1996) stated that the literature on self-actualization of children and young people is limited and contradicting. Adopting Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the Maslowian Scale and the Reflections of Self by Youth (ROSY),

Lewis studied the self-actualisation scores of junior high school students and he found complex contradicting results: The Maslowian scale results show contradicting results that self-actualisation needs increase with age but also younger children show greater needs for self-esteem. Likewise, the discrepancy against the Maslowian theory was also present in the results of ROSY which show that the younger students had higher self-actualisation scores than the older students. Although this research project did not focus on the interrelationship between age differences and needs of self-esteem and self-actualisation among the participants in different stages of adolescence, the participants' narratives support that their emotional, esteem and self-actualisation needs played a significant part in their friendship experiences throughout their secondary school years. For example, the motive of self-actualisation was a conscious one for Jeff when he made friends at school especially in the senior years: Jeff said that he found knowledge exchange and learning more about himself were the most important purpose of his life and of his social interactions. When asked to choose, he said that he preferred having an intellectual discussion on physics with an academic friend to watching a movie in the cinema with friends. His outstanding academic potential exceeded rankings and exam marks, so he found the friends he made in junior secondary who only cared about exam marks were not the best kind of friends for him in the senior years as he felt they did not help him to learn intellectually. Self-actualisation seemed to be the strongest driving force for Jeff to develop and maintain school friendships especially in the later stage of adolescence. Although unlike Jeff, all other participants were not consciously aware of the process of self-actualisation that occurred in their interactions with school friends, in the cases of Chan and Jason, their accounts of friendship experiences also show that they regarded the friends who could enrich the development of their own academic or personal potentials as more suitable and enjoyable companions. Other participants such as Joe, Ken and Mary also stated that their friendship experiences in secondary school, whether the friendships lasted or not, facilitated their maturity and shaped their values.

5.2.2 Contextual differences in needs

Male adolescents' social needs

Based on Maslow's theory on Hierarchy of Needs, a study (Goebel & Brown, 1981) among participants from 9 to 80 years of age found that age and gender have a significant impact on the prevalence and extent of the various friendship needs. Its results show that the need for love, although high among all ages, is lowest among adolescent males. While both male and

female adolescents have the highest esteem needs, young adults have the highest self-actualisation needs. Such mixed findings also appear in the narratives from Chan, Ken, Jeff and Jason. It was observable that their needs for companionship were diverse and complex. These participants' dual desires for companionship and independence support some researchers' arguments that a well-functioning friendship is considered to be balanced between intimacy and individuality (Hartup, 1996, Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997) as while they wanted to stay connected with their friends and classmates they sometimes preferred staying alone and engaging in solitary hobbies. Ken's narrative shows him not needing anyone when he was engaged in animal observation but feeling lonely and wanting to be included by his friends if he found that his peers were engaged in group activities without him. Ken's elaboration demonstrates how varied the same person's needs may be in different contexts.

Although this research did not deliberately make comparisons according to age or gender, the narratives from all participants indicate that the social need for a sense of belonging and love was in general similarly crucial to male and female adolescents. In contrast to Goebel & Brown's (1981) conclusion that male adolescents have lower social needs than their female counterparts, Billy and Dora showed the opposite: Billy admitted it was important to him to have friends as they gave him his much needed sense of affiliation and being accompanied by his best friend could dispel loneliness. He therefore tried his best to stay with his best friend all day long (including lesson time, lunch break and after-school evening tutorial classes). In contrast, Dora's stories hint that she was not in great need of the same magnitude of love and sense of belonging as Billy. Although Dora said she felt happy to be accompanied by her friends, she did not always need to stay with her best friend all the time and at times she preferred and enjoyed being alone.

These differences suggest that gender may not be a consistent factor in determining an adolescent's need for a sense of belonging and a close tie with a chum. Would this finding be explained by the fact that Billy was brought up in a single child family and his parents both worked fulltime while Dora had three younger siblings and her mother was always at home? Yet such speculation about the connection between family circumstances and emotional needs is not supported when we consider the case of another participant Chan, who despite being a single child with a situation and childhood experiences like Billy's often preferred being alone and was emotionally independent. These inconsistent findings among different participants could provide a rationale for further research on the impacts of personality and family relations on friendship needs and experiences (Hartup, 1996).

Academically high achieving adolescents' esteem needs

In one of his studies, Berndt suggested that “having friendship high in positive features ...apparently does not affect children's general self-esteem” (Berndt, 2002 p.10). However, some other academics suggest that academic high achieving adolescents' esteem is influenced by their perceived physical attractiveness and academic and social comparison (Ben-Eliyahn et al. 2017, Ash & Huebner, 1998). These inconsistent conclusions in academic high achievers' self-esteem also exist among the participants in this study. Their stories show that their esteem needs, if defined in terms of self-worth and achievement, were significant but complex: As most of them had been top students since early childhood, their esteem needs were tied between the intrinsic and extrinsic values and the internal and external recognitions of their achievements. For example, Tom was particularly conscious about his top student high academic ability identity, feeling he needed to maintain this status for survival at school. He said when he got excellent public exam results, no teachers commented on his behaviour and as he got outstanding exam results, he was granted a scholarship to study in the UK leading towards a prospect of a research career. Therefore, he believed that achievements and external recognition were assets quintessential to his identity and only by maintaining such external recognition would he have a more stable future. Tom's emphasis on academic achievement as the crux of his school life resonates with the goal valuation domain of the Achievement Orientation Model (AOM). The AOM suggests that gifted students are motivated by self-efficacy, goal valuation and environmental perception (Siegle, & McCoach, 2005). And goal valuation is comprised of the intrinsic value (a student's interest in a task), the utility value (the meaningfulness of a task) and the attainment value (the importance students attach to the task as it relates to their conception of their identity and ideals). Based on Tom's achievement-identity-oriented mindset, his interactions with school friends were mostly academic-oriented. He took part in a series of mathematics competitions against his schoolmates and felt insecure when other schoolmates outperformed him. He saw many other students who had similar or potentially higher academic abilities than him as his rivals. It was possible that because of Tom's anxiety in maintaining his top student identity, he found Ken the only possible choice for having as his friend as Ken was never competitive, and he regarded Ken as less able than him. When Tom took up a more superior and leading role in his academic collaboration with Ken, Tom gained reassurance of his own academically strong identity.

In contrast with such a clear example of satisfying the strong need for external recognition of achievements through friendship interactions, Billy is a complex counterexample of how

friends influence an adolescent's esteem needs. Although he admitted that he was serious about his learning, he at the same time had a rather relaxed attitude towards extrinsic recognition, and the friends he was closest with were those who also had a rather laid-back attitude towards achievements. Unlike Tom, Billy showed no interest in taking part in competitive events but he actively engaged in a large number of school positions and services in which he was either the chairman or a subsidiary member without a title in many teams. His interactions with friends were mostly through these school responsibilities or leisure activities. However, while Billy might seem to have ascertained his self-worth in a less competitive and less stressful manner, this apparently very successful academic high achiever and imminent student leader revealed his feeling of insecurity: he revealed that he needed to stay intensively close with his good friends because, as he put it, he could not stand being alone. Billy's sense of insecurity was also illustrated in his account of his most difficult experience with friends in which he felt threatened by the intrusion of another schoolmate into his closed dyadic friendship. Billy's experiences underscore the complex interrelationships of an academic high achiever's self-worth, sense of security and the significance of friendship on emotional wellbeing. Tom's and Billy's contrasting and complex experiences point to the need for deeper understanding of the individual contextual differences in the enquiry into the relationship between academic abilities, school friendships and the emotional needs of adolescents.

5.2.3 Chumship

All participants in this study had at least one same-sex friend whom they regarded as their best friend. Although given that eight out of the ten participants studied in a single-sex school, they had more opportunities for same-sex friendships due to environmental factors, whether a same-sex friend is valued as close or best friend within a same-sex school setting is arguably a matter of personal choice influenced by subjective experiences regardless of the environmental constraints. In his Interpersonal Theory, Sullivan postulated that in pre-adolescence, approximately starting from the age of eight onwards, children start forming intimate relationships with people outside their family. The experience of having a same sex close friend or chum is the first target of interpersonal intimacy and the foundation of the child's future social and romantic relationships (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan believed that if this need for chumship is not met, the person will experience stress and loneliness. Sullivan also suggested

that when a child enters adolescence, the importance of same sex chumship will be replaced by desire for a romantic partner of the opposite sex (Sullivan, 1953).

Although the participants attended secondary school in the age range of 12 to 18, a stage later than the pre-adolescent stage defined by Sullivan, these participants all mentioned having at least one same sex close friend when they studied in secondary school. Their friendships with same sex friends in adolescence supported Berndt's (1982) claim that same sex close friendships are still important to adolescence. In this study, these same sex close friends the participants had might be either the results of the specific environmental limitations of their school settings, in the sense that they were allocated to a single-sex school under the Hong Kong school placement mechanism or a matter of their own choice. The participants reported that they and their chums engaged in school and social activities, and some of them shared their thoughts and feelings, and worked together for the same academic and life goals. They said that their levels of academic, social and personal stress were relieved and that they felt happy when they had a close friend. Their narratives of chumship echo the positive gains from having high-quality friendships presented in other friendship studies (Berndt, 1996, 2002; Hartup, 1996). The gains of having an intimate same sex friend were particularly apparent in Mary's contrasting friendship experiences in junior and senior years. In the junior years when she had no choice but to befriend two girls whom she did not feel in tune with, she was under great stress because she felt she had to conceal her feelings to accommodate her superficial friendships. However, in senior years when she found a true friend with whom she could share her most vulnerable thoughts and express her unhappiness freely, she said she became more relaxed and more confident in herself. She no longer suffered from the sense of isolation and loneliness that troubled her in the junior years. Mary's experience of chumship largely resonates with Sullivan's assertions.

5.2.4 Altruism

Chumship has been defined as an intense attachment to a same-sex friend characterised by intimacy and reciprocity (McGuire & Weisz, 1982, Mannarino, 1976, Strickland, 1981). A study (Yarcheski & Mahon, 1984) suggests that people who have a chum tend to demonstrate a higher degree of altruism in their social relationships, and adolescents who demonstrate higher degrees of altruism and have a close chum tend to be less lonely. Altruism is a specific form of prosocial behaviour which is characterised by voluntary acts intended to benefit others

and is motivated by internal motives including concern, sympathy, or altruistic values. Although no extrinsic rewards are involved, altruistic acts foster the basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy and promote mutual acceptance and positive relationships with other people (Lam, 2012).

In the participants' narratives of their everyday interactions with their friends, these academic high achievers often showed altruism by helping their friends in schoolwork or in school responsibilities. Billy said he always helped his friends in their studies and he offered his help to his friends running the Student Council election, although he was not interested in the Student Council at all. He did so simply to reduce his friends' workload. The manifestation of altruism was highlighted by Ken in his reflection on his friendship with Tom when he was asked about what he gained from their friendship. Ken said that one main feature of his friendship with Tom was about his sacrifice. He had to give up his chances of developing other friendships, and he felt accommodating Tom's unique personality and behaviour could sometimes be exhausting. However, he insisted that his friendship with Tom was precious and rewarding. In Tom's point of view, this altruism was mutual. Although Tom might be seen as the bigger beneficiary in the friendship as Ken apparently had a bigger role as the altruistic giver, Tom's final comments show that his own altruism towards Ken contrasted with his general claim that "friends were non-essential goods" and friends were needed only for making his own life better. He described Ken as his only true friend and said that he would forgo his own welfare for the sake of Ken's. In their special and perhaps difficult friendship of two seemingly very different adolescents, altruism appeared to be a strong factor and evidence of their chumship.

5.2.5 Homophily

The theory of "homophily", that is that it is more likely for people to form friendships when they share similarities with one another (Berndt, 1996; Rubin et al. 2008), largely applies to the friendship experiences of the participants in this study. The participants' narratives in many ways suggest that similarities in academic ability, attitude and performance, personality, academic and non-academic interest, socio-demographic context, and educational goals and trajectory contributed to the formation and consolidation of their friendships. Many of the participants started socialising with schoolmates who were similar to them either due to teachers' arrangements or their own choice. At the very beginning of their school friendships,

resonating with literature on proximity and interpersonal relationships (Schneider, Gruman, & Coutts, 2012; Fehr, 1996), most of the participants started befriending schoolmates who were allocated to the same class or learning groups and those who sat near them. After that the classmates nearby might start to have more frequent conversations and interactions if they had similar academic needs. However, their narratives indicate that similarities in academic needs only formed a platform for the beginning of their friendships. In her book *Friendship Processes*, Fehr (1996) mentioned that one of the factors that sustains a friendship is friends' choice of activities. Fehr said that friends are more likely to have similar activities preferences than acquaintances. Similar to Fehr's idea, in the context of these participants' school friendships, the findings show that in order to facilitate the continuity of their friendships, further enrichment – such as the shared academic and non-academic activities and a common educational trajectory – was necessary. Through engaging in the same activity together, the participants' intimacy with their friends was enhanced through companionship, mutual understanding and support. Alongside similarity in activities preference, academic studies (Berndt, 1982; Fehr, 1996) also point out that similarity in attitude has a stronger and longer-lasting effect on sustaining these participants' friendships than other areas of similarity as the participants felt that their social and emotional exchanges would be, in their words, “smoother” and “happier” with those having the same values and mindset as themselves. When they acquired such positive feelings, they experienced a higher level of satisfaction and this reinforced their friendship. The friendship between Tom and Ken is an example of how similarity in activity preferences and attitude can override extreme differences in personality and individual talents: as commented by themselves, Tom, a gifted Mathematician who was not very good at maintaining social relationships, and Ken, a passionate animal lover who was good at developing social interactions with different people, were not obstructed by their dissimilarities and became good friends through predominantly academic exchanges and preparing for the HKDSE exam together. For example, Ken chose to have lunch with Tom because both Tom and he had the same target that they wanted to finish their lunch as quickly as possible so that they could return to their classroom to continue their academic studies. Both of them did not want to take part in PE lessons because they wanted to have more time to revise for exams. This led to Ken's happy memory of conspiring with Tom to smuggle a Chemistry textbook to the changing room for him in a PE lesson. Ken and Tom's special friendship echoes Berndt's (1982) argument that similarity in attitude towards school is more crucial among a range of similarities in adolescent friendship.

Although similarity is essential for two people to be attracted to one another in most of these participants' school friendship experiences, it is also noteworthy that some participants' narratives, such as Chan's, Jason's and Dora's, show that these academic high achieving adolescents were aware of the reality that no one is entirely the same and that given their unparalleled abilities and achievements and perhaps their distinctive ways of thinking, it was hard to expect a friend to be identical to them in their academic ability or creativity, interest or thinking, even when their friends were in the same school learning context and experiencing the same educational trajectory. Furthermore, some participants valued their own and others' uniqueness and they saw the conducive inputs of diversity to their self-development. In the friendship experiences of Joe (who befriended a schoolmate who did not plan to study overseas and was studying different exam subjects), Mary (who made more friends in her senior class with students who had lower academic abilities than herself and who had a diverse range of interests and behaviour), Ken (who became the chum of a special and different classmate without much in common except their exam targets) and Tom (who saw Ken as his only faithful friend and yet regarded Ken as academically inferior to himself and having a very different life attitude and personality), all these participants went beyond the comfort zone of homophily and enjoyed friendships with schoolmates who were considerably different from them, and thus developed new academic and personal insights which facilitated their personal growth. These examples underscore the dual existence of similarity and dissimilarity in these participants' friendship needs and experiences.

5.2.6 Loneliness and intimacy

Studies on gifted adolescents' loneliness have drawn inconsistent conclusions in quantitative research and qualitative individual case studies (Rowlands, 1974, Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997, Prieto & Ferrando, 2009; Gross, 2004). For instance, in Gross's study, the exceptionally academically gifted students reported severe loneliness and frustration in their peer relationships (Gross, 2004). However, Godor & Szymanski studied the PISA 2012 findings and concluded that academically gifted students have a similar or lower level of loneliness than their non-gifted peers (Godor & Szymanski, 2017). Their claim was made based on the results of PISA 2015 in which loneliness was assessed under the broad topic of teenage students' social dimension of well-being (Borgonovi, F. & Pál, J. 2016) in which students were asked to rate five items: *I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school; I make friends easily at school; I feel like I belong to school; I feel awkward and out of place in my school; other*

students seem to like me and I feel lonely at school (Borgonovi, F. & Pál, J. 2016, p.30). Comparing with the items adopted in the PISA study and Gross's research participants' accounts, the narratives of the academic high achievers in Hong Kong in this study display much richer but more diverse and inconsistent experiences of loneliness. For example, Chan and Dora were less sensitive to the feeling of loneliness and they in fact preferred to have time for being alone. Chan reported that he only experienced feelings of loneliness when he felt helpless in the face of problems that he could not solve, but as he usually managed to find solutions to his own problems he did not frequently feel helpless or lonely. Dora mentioned she liked having her friends to accompany her in after-class leisure activities but when she was preparing for the public exam, she chose to stay at home and enjoyed studying alone. Chan's and Dora's comments about whether they felt lonely or not in their school days support the literature that gifted students may have similar or even lower levels of loneliness. This might be attributed to their superior intellectual and emotional maturity.

Ken's and Mary's narratives added further complexities to the study of adolescents' loneliness. They were lonely at some moments or stages of their school life but these feelings varied in different ways. In general, it appears that when they felt that they were being treated as outsiders by the dominant peer group this was a source of loneliness. Ken said he could enjoy engaging in solitary hobbies and he did not feel lonely and at times preferred to be on his own when he was fully engaged. However, he also said he felt lonely when he was treated as an outsider and was being ignored by his peers. His comments echo Maes et al.'s (2015) claim that Chinese adolescents have reduced loneliness when they feel they are included in a collective community. Similarly, Mary said she was lonely in junior years and needed to physically stay with two girls but still felt lonely as she did not have the same personality and interests as them; but in senior years, when she was situated in a more inclusive classroom, she did not feel lonely even on occasions when she was physically alone. She explained that loneliness emerged as a result of being ignored by others. However, when she was in a class with a wider acceptance of individual differences and she felt she had secured some similar-minded friends, she gained confidence in herself and abandoned her worries about being seen as a loner or being different from others. The diverse experiences of loneliness in the narratives of Chan, Mary, Ken and Dora suggest that the feeling of loneliness could be attributed to various personal and social factors including one's personal characteristics, culture and the social and peers contexts they are situated in.

About intimacy, Berndt (1982) summed up research data of friendship studies and challenged Sullivan's idea that same-sex intimacy would be replaced by romantic relationships with the opposite sex in adolescence onwards. Berndt believed that intimacy with same sex friends may even increase in adolescence. There are a number of research findings on the benefits of an intimate relationship, and intimacy as a main feature of a friendship in a person's life particularly in adolescence (Hook et al, 2003; Fehr, 2002). According to the narratives of the participants, intimacy was evident in their high-quality friendships. However, its prevalence and significance varied. Their narratives show that the participants studied, played and relaxed together and some of them shared their inner thoughts and private family or personal concerns with their close friends. However, the participants' narratives also expose intricate differences about what intimacy was and how intimate friends interacted. Numerous studies (Urberg et al., 1995; Hamm. & Faircloth, 2005; Hussong, 2000; Leaper, 1994; Maccoby, 1999; Paul & White, 1990; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997, Ko et al., 2014) suggest that girls in adolescence value intimacy more and are more likely to achieve intimacy through self-disclosure while boys have a less precise concept of intimacy and their closeness with friends is more likely to be achieved through activities. However, the narratives of these participants support Berndt's (1982) challenge to the notion of sex difference in adolescents' intimate friendships as citing a number of studies Berndt came to the conclusion that the factor of sex difference in intimate friendships was insignificant. Berndt hypothesized that boys may spend less time in conversations about their emotions than girls, but they may acquire a deep understanding of each other by spending time together. Although exploring differing views by gender was not an intended focus of this study, echoing Berndt's assertion, the narratives in this study do not support gender difference as a strong factor in developing intimacy with friends. The two female participants, Mary and Dora, interacted differently with their best friends: Mary's intimacy with her best friend was achieved by sharing inner personal thoughts and knowing she was always by her side helping her altruistically. Dora only enjoyed the company of her best friend in leisure activities but did not feel the need for confiding her most personal feelings. She even replied that she did not know what intimacy really meant. Dora's lack of intimate exchanges with her best friend presents a contrast with two of the male participants Billy and Don in the study who used the term intimacy frequently in their narrations. Other male participants also seem to have a close or intimate relationship with their best friends. Their conversations and sharing ranged from academic matters (including schoolwork, exam preparation and university choices), non-academic activities (extra-

curricular leisure activities and school leadership duties) to family issues, religion or political issues.

Among all the participants, Ken had a relatively different interpretation of a close/ intimate school friendship. Although he recognised that he had a strong and intense friendship with Tom in terms of the time he spent with Tom and how much he sacrificed for Tom, he said that he would only define his friendship with Tom as being “close” but not a soulmate. He felt it was acceptable that school friends were only close friends but not people with whom to really share one’s deepest inner thoughts. Ken’s unique explanations on the differences between close friends and soulmates demonstrate the complexity and inconsistency in adolescents’ understandings of friendships.

These participants’ narratives expose the challenges of studying and measuring intimacy in adolescents’ friendships. Being academically high achievers, having unique special educational needs or being situated in a specific family or school context may lead to differences in how intimacy is understood and needed.

5.2.7 Ability grouping

How ability grouping influences students’ academic, personal and social developments has been a main topic of academic and professional discussions in education. A study conducted on the impacts of ability grouping to years 8 and 9 students in six UK schools found that students taught in higher sets experienced higher pressure created by high expectations and felt frustrated by the restricted pedagogy (Boaler et al., 2000). Contrary to such negative view on ability grouping, some gifted education researchers (Gross, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1997, Eddles-Hirsch et al. 2012) suggested that academic high achievers make friends more easily with peers who share similar academic ability, attitude, learning trajectory and goals. In their studies, the gifted participants in ability grouping educational settings tended to share similarities in academic and other interests which were not usually perceived as “cool” by their non-academically gifted peers and they therefore felt more understood and accepted. In the context of Hong Kong, ability-grouping is broadly implemented as most students are streamed based on their academic levels when they enter S1 and in the senior years, the subject allocation mechanism based on academic performance leads to ability grouping by default. In our study, for the participants who placed greatest importance to their academic learning such as Tom, Chan and Jason, studying in a classroom with peers of equally strong academic ability encouraged friendship development. Similarly high-ability classmates and friends were their

partners in academic and extra-curricular activities. Moreover, learning with students of similarly high academic ability also enhanced their willingness to engage in collaboration and groupwork. For example, Chan said that he did not worry about being perceived as arrogant if he disagreed with his teammates when he worked with friends of similar abilities. Chan's comments support some studies that suggest that academic high achievers, like other adolescents, enjoy working in groups but are sensitive to stigma such as being seen as different or weird when they had different views from their non-academically gifted peers (Coleman & Cross, 1988) and tensions such as feeling that it is unfair when some less able students become over-reliant on them or become free-riders (Hall & Buzwell, 2019).

Another concern about the effect of performance-based ability grouping on academic high achievers' personal and social developments is the possibility of creating an unhealthy competitive culture in a high ability classroom. Having competition has been said to be detrimental to friendship development (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan argued that competition among friends would lead to anxiety and loneliness. Berndt (2004) suggested that a high-quality friendship is characterised by being high in intimacy and collaboration but low in competition. The social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) also suggests that comparison with equally or even more academically outstanding classmates would lead to lower self-esteem. Contrary to these views on the negative impact of competition, some studies show that the impacts of competition among peers can also be positive. For example, in a literature summary on the affective benefits of middle school gifted students' academic competition (Ozturk & Debelak, 2008), competition among peers is said to have a wide range of benefits including as a motivator, nurturing healthy self-concept, teaching students how to cope with subjectivity, and role modelling. These varied forms and impacts of competition also exist in the participants' narratives in this study. For example, Tom saw students who were as strong as him as rivals or even enemies; Chan and Jason enjoyed having an intense debate over academic topics while Jeff and Yuen remained friends even when Yuen was chosen to be the head boy but not Jeff. Schapiro et al. (2009) postulated that it was not competition itself that is damaging to friendship but the goals of the competition. They suggested that the academically gifted students who focused on winning over others would have more negative friendship experiences with their academically compatible peers whereas those who focused on improving their own competence through the process of competition had more positive friendship experiences with their peers. The negative friendship experiences of Tom and the

positive collaborative friendships between Chan and Jason and between Jeff and Yuen largely support Schapiro's argument.

Although the above discussion may in general indicate that ability grouping can benefit academic high achievers' friendship experiences, the narratives from the participants who studied in a mixed-ability classroom also gave insights to how academic high achievers benefit from making friends with less able peers. Among all the participants, Joe and Mary were the only two who studied in a mixed ability class in the senior years. Joe appreciated the diverse academic perspectives and contributions of his less able classmates. More importantly, with such a more inclusive social dynamic in a mixed ability class, these academic high achievers had more opportunities and a higher incentive to make friends from all walks of life. Ken, Mary and Joe all said that the friendship experiences they had in a class of mixed ability students improved their inter-personal skills and broadened their friendship circles, and the benefits of this extended to their adult life.

5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, a number of specific aspects of the findings were discussed in association with existing theories and literature. These aspects include friendship needs and their contextual differences. Further in-depth discussions were on chumship, homophily, loneliness, intimacy, altruism and ability grouping. These discussions highlight the diverse and complex manifestation of friendship needs and experiences of the participants, contributing to further understandings on friendship studies, create opportunities for further research, and offer insights to professional practice.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

This research study aimed to explore the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. This research adopted narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology of the design of this study and semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection which provided a platform for individuals to present their own voice and facilitated an in-depth exploration of the complex subjective experiences of the school friendships of this very unique group of adolescents. The interviews with ten participants yielded rich data and the findings were reported under three broad themes: friendship needs, friendship processes and contextual factors of academic high achievers and friendship. While the findings exhibit complex and diverse school friendship experiences, certain patterns emerged. The participants' narratives show that their friendships at school satisfied their instrumental, emotional and self-actualisation needs. Their friendships started with proximity and homophily and were consolidated by engaging in shared academic and non-academic activities and school responsibilities and experiencing a similar educational trajectory. Their friendships were strengthened through self-disclosure in either everyday fun and relaxing sharing or confiding their inner thoughts and feelings with their trusted friends. The high-quality friendships narrated by the participants show altruism. Teachers also had an influential role in the participants' friendship development. The participants' high academic achiever identity was both a personal and an environmental factor that influenced their friendship development. Their high academic achieving characteristics put them into a specific school setting and their personal, emotional and academic characteristics drove them to make friends with certain specific qualities. Answers to the research question: how did academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools experience friendships? were presented in the Findings chapter under three broad themes namely friendship needs, friendship processes and personal and contextual factors influencing the friendship experiences of academic high achievers. Key topics of their friendship experiences such as security, love and sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, chumship, homophily, altruism, loneliness and intimacy, and ability grouping were further illustrated and discussed in the Discussion of Findings chapter. The findings present a rich and in-depth picture of these individuals' friendship experiences, showing that although these individuals experienced similar friendship elements to those experienced by their non-academic peers, the participants were unique individuals whose friendship experiences were influenced by diverse personal and contextual

factors which created intra- and inter-personal differences in their experiences. The findings of this study demonstrated the complexity, intricacies and diversity of adolescent friendship experiences of some high academic achieving individuals in Hong Kong secondary schools.

6.2 Contribution to knowledge

This research study explored the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools. The findings contributed to further understandings on friendship studies by providing contemporary or different insights into the unique experiences of Hong Kong academic high achieving students' school friendships in the following dimensions:

One distinctive feature of this research study was the focus of a group of academic high achievers whose exam results put them into an exceptionally high range of academic abilities and performance. All participants' exam results were within the top 0.2% out of a candidate population of 40000 to 60000 in Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examinations. This study acquired a deeper understanding of a less explored area of these extremely academically able students' school friendship experiences showing the interactions between their academically gifted qualities and identities and their social and peer relationships in a specific Hong Kong school setting. They had different instrumental, emotional and self-actualisation friendship needs, and their needs were met purposefully or unintentionally through their everyday academic, extra-curricular and personal interactions with their friends. Their friendship processes were complex and contextualised. Similarity formed the foundation of their friendships while sharing similar educational trajectories consolidated and dissimilarities enriched their friendships. Personal self-disclosure and altruism aided the elevation of friendship. This study also shows that the exceptional academic characteristics of this distinctive group of Hong Kong adolescents created a context for their multiple and complex experiences and perceptions on friendships. Their friendship dynamics were complex; there was co-existence of popularity and stigma, competition and collaboration and unique school experiences resulting in unique academic and emotional needs caused by their high academic status. Alongside these broad findings, this study also displays the intra- and inter-personal differences of the participants' situations and experiences. These findings on a unique group of adolescents enriched existing scholarly discussions on gifted students' friendship needs and their personal and social well-being.

The participants' unique and diverse accounts contributed to a fuller picture of the jigsaw puzzle of adolescents' friendship experiences which highlights the fact that under the broadly homogenous label of being academic high achievers, all of these participants experienced school friendships in their own complex and unique ways due to their different personal and social contexts. While showcasing the diverse and unique voices of the participants which display complexity and at times inconsistency, this study built upon the findings and established three broad themes and a number of conceptual focuses, resonating with some topics in existing academic works on friendship. The findings therefore can enrich and may possibly further problematise existing academic discussions on friendship and gifted education studies among international and Hong Kong academic communities, both within and between branches of education studies including counselling, gifted education, inclusive education and educational psychology. In particular, the diverse and in-depth findings in this study offer critical responses to some widely cited academic literature including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory (1953). The findings also contribute further insights into more recent contentious and diverse discussions on various topics such as defining friendship, adolescents' understandings of emotional concepts such as loneliness and intimacy, and the complex impact of competition and ability grouping in secondary school settings. For instance, the findings of this study underscore the co-existence of a general pattern of friendship needs and developments alongside individual differences among this particular group of academic high-achieving adolescents in Hong Kong. Such individual differences are shown to be related to their levels of academic ability, social maturity and specific personal contexts. These findings resonate with more recent research on the trajectories of friendship developments (Fehr, 1996), similarities in friendships (Berndt, 2002, 2004), and low academic engagement and poor social-emotional wellbeing of adolescents who experienced high friend-related stresses (Benner et al. 2019). The findings also add a qualitative dimension to support current academic research which has found intra- and interpersonal differences by combining self-reporting friendship surveys with neurological imaging of adolescents' social brain (Becht et al. 2020). It is hoped that the participants' personal accounts cited in this report, and the themes established, present themselves as part of the body of existing academic literature which celebrates the on-going development of qualitative research traditions and complements the well-founded quantitative research traditions in the academic community.

Another contribution this study made to academic studies is the successful adoption of narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology in the study of adolescents' school friendship experiences.

As suggested by Elliott (2005), narrative inquiry is a suitable methodology for research which has an interest in people's lived experiences and aims to empower individual participants and value the role of the researcher as a narrator. The adoption of narrative inquiry in this study and the research outcome produced based on this methodological position substantiated the usefulness of narrative inquiry as a paradigmatic framework for academic studies of people's lived experiences. In this study, the use of semi-structured interviews as a platform for participants to exercise their own discretion to give their personal accounts of their lived experiences in their own voices was a successful act of putting the spirit of empowering research participants into practice. In the Findings chapter, the presentation of largely unedited quotations of participants' narratives offered readers the knowledge of these participants' experiences through their own voices. The organisation of the complex, diverse experiences of the participants into a systematic thematic academic presentation is additional evidence to support the value of narrative inquiry in academic research.

My dual role of being a teacher and a researcher and my professional knowledge and experiences which informed my decisions in this study also facilitated an original and unique contribution to knowledge. As a teacher in Hong Kong for more than 20 years in the school where most of the research participants of this study studied, my unique background and position provided a unique perspective for this study. My dual role afforded an interactive balance between objectivity and subjectivity of a researcher and an insider in the researched setting resonating with Elliot's notion (2005) of the researcher being a narrator. The execution of such careful balance in this study and its outcome provided certain insights to the methodological knowledge of qualitative research studies which perhaps both enriched and problematised the on-going academic discussions on the role of researchers in academic research.

6.3 Implications to practice

As an EdD research, this report ends with an Implications to Practice section. Although each of the suggestions made in the Implications to Practice section relates to a well-acknowledged topic yielding continuous research and development individually, the qualitative findings of this research may contribute further insights to Hong Kong educators in planning and implementing practical measures in order to better cater for students' educational needs. This research situated itself in the qualitative paradigm and the participants' experiences were

displayed in the manner of personal in-depth narratives which can offer a different perspective for further investigation, evaluation and planning of relevant practical measures implemented in Hong Kong schools, against the seemingly stronger academic tradition of quantitative academic studies among the Hong Kong research community.

The findings of this study offer an added dimension to further professional discussions on how to cater for the educational needs of high academic achievers in mainstream secondary schools in Hong Kong. Improvement measures to further facilitate friendship development among students could be implemented at a systemic and structural level, school and class administrative level and day-to-day personal level. While all these considerations on improving practice may have been studied and continue to deserve more in-depth research and discussions on their own, the following are some brief suggestions for teachers' reference in their own contexts.

The findings of this study show that even the seemingly successful academic high achieving students in Hong Kong secondary schools found the academic-oriented and exam performance-based educational environment had a determining impact on almost all facets of their school life from where they studied to who they studied with and how they studied with their peers. On the systemic level, Hong Kong has always had an academic-oriented education system in which students' promotions from primary school to secondary and university education are almost completely dependent on their academic performance. At the end of each stage of schooling, there is only one standard exit exam for all students and there are limited alternative further education paths for those who do not obtain good exam results. Such a narrow focus in Hong Kong's education system has a strong impact on how students lead their student life and how they interact with their schoolmates. For example, if students think getting high exam marks is the only goal they have in school, their friendship development will be shaped by this pragmatic purpose of schooling and their motive for having friends may be geared towards such a pragmatic consideration. In order to reduce the overwhelming control of the exam achievement-oriented education system, there is a continuous need for diversification in either non-academic, vocational education paths, or in the structure and mode of exam assessments in each stage of schooling to incorporate assessment elements on students' non-academic talents. This could reduce the overwhelming pressure of relying on academic learning and therefore students would feel more relaxed psychologically and their improved emotional wellbeing would be translated to more frequent and higher quality interactions with school friends. However, if the existing academic-oriented assessment and exam system is to remain

unchanged, the students' over-emphasis on marks and ranking perhaps could be lowered if the mode of assessment were to change into a mode that focuses more on continuous assessment of students' engagement in groupwork such as group laboratory practicums in science subjects or group presentations in humanities. In the group work assessments, more thought could be given to how students' team spirit is assessed and how outcome of their groupwork demonstrates effective collaboration. With more collaborative elements added to assessments, students would have more incentive and opportunities to improve their interpersonal skills and school friendships.

The findings of this study also show that academic high achievers developed friendships more easily with peers of similar ability and talents but some of them benefited from socialising with classmates of mixed ability and diverse interests. In light of these complex individual differences, on the school and class level, similar to the school where Mary attended, in the schools where school management and teachers are allowed to exercise some degree of administrative autonomy on student admission, class allocation and subject allocation, suitable tailor-made practices could be considered – for example devising a mechanism and structure of class allocation which allows students of various abilities to have some lessons with students of similar abilities and other lessons with students of mixed abilities. For example, subjects that are more academic-focused and require a strong academic foundation from previous learning such as Advanced Mathematics could be taught in ability-grouping classes while other subjects such as Liberal Studies, Religious studies, or Physical Education could be taught in mixed classes. Furthermore, it has been a common practice in some schools in Hong Kong that staff in charge of class allocation work hold review meetings with homeroom teachers, school social workers and counselling teachers to make the necessary arrangements for placing some students together in the same class in special circumstances, similar to what Tom described when he was promoted to S4, so as to reduce bullying or facilitate a friendly and inclusive class culture. As the data show that lunch time was a most suitable time in a school day for students to develop friendship, school management may also work on timetable arrangements which allow more time for socialisation, such as extending lunch hours. However, the extended lunch hours should not be used for academic or exam related activities, which is a rather common practice in Hong Kong schools today especially for senior class students and for students who are in remedial teaching groups. After-school extra-curricular activities held by various interest clubs or by school houses can also provide an opportunity for students to develop same-age or cross-age friendships with their schoolmates. However, it is worth noting that although students

would prefer to enjoy autonomy in running these extra-curricular activities, as commented by the participants Mary, Ken and Jeff, teachers' suitable guidance can effectively facilitate students' social and personal gains in these activities and such guidance is usually welcomed by students.

One salient finding which appears in all ten participants' narratives is the significance of their teachers in facilitating or mediating their school friendship development. On the basic classroom management level, how students' seating and grouping are arranged can also have an influential impact on students' social interaction and friendship development. Pedagogical considerations including whether assignments are done in groups or in pairs, and whether students' academic outcomes are assessed by marks or rankings or by their efforts and participation, may shape the social dynamics among students. On a personal level, teachers' sensitivity to the class culture, to how they can act as role models in being welcoming and friendly towards members of the class, and to how they can skilfully support students who might have friendship problems can shape students' social and friendship experiences in class.

Subject to contextual considerations and limitations, although these suggestions may not be practical in every school and every classroom, it is hoped that they will offer insights to further inform teachers' professional practice.

6.4 Strengths and limitations

Aiming at exploring the friendship experiences of academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools, this study collected rich personal narratives from a unique group of Hong Kong students through their own voices. The accounts they presented were detailed, displaying diversity and nuance and yet they also revealed patterns and commonalities which allowed a general systematic understanding of these students as a broadly homogenous group. To meet the aim of this study, having academic high achieving school graduates as participants and having a trusting relationship between me and participants were two crucial features which proved to be strengths. These participants' verbal and emotional maturity and the mutual understanding and trusting rapport between the research participants and me as the researcher formed by my previous professional background as a/their teacher in secondary school allowed a genuine and open sharing of their inner thoughts.

Another strength of this research study lies in the methods adopted including sending interview questions in advance so that participants were given sufficient time to interpret the questions and make their autonomous decisions about how to answer the questions. Such practice

improved the quality of the interview data and also met the aim of empowering the research participants. Having two rounds of interviews with almost all participants also increased the richness and credibility of the data, with the first-round interviews inductively exploring issues related to the research topic and the second-round interviews confirming and expanding on the data from the first round interviews, and also affording opportunities for incidental triangulation from having participants who were friends with each other and who could offer different perspectives on the same incidents.

Although this study yielded inspiring findings and discussions, there are also limitations. One characteristic of this study was that eight out of ten participants were recruited from recent graduates from one secondary school in Hong Kong and these were all male while the other two participants, who were female, were graduates from two other schools. This composition of participants facilitated a focused and contextualised study of the needs of a specific group of students in Hong Kong who were in many ways similar to other Hong Kong students but at the same time situated the research in a very unique context which gave rise to their unparalleled school experiences. These participants' exam achievements placed them in the category of exceptional academic high achievers in Hong Kong mainstream schools. Three of them ranked among the top six candidates of their exam cohort of around 40,000 to 60,000 candidates while the rest of the participants were within the top 50. Such a uniquely specific group of students who may only represent a very small number of secondary school students in Hong Kong, posed a risk that the sample could be biased.

As this study aimed to solicit participants' friendship experiences in their entire secondary school stage, that is from 12 to 17 years of age, and the selection criteria for participants included their exit exam results in the final year of secondary education, the participants were all over 18 and the narrations of secondary school experiences that they gave in these semi-structured interviews were recollections of their past based on their memories and their personal choices about disclosure. Although having these adults as participants facilitated more sophisticated and mature conversations in the interviews, the issue of whether their narratives were faithful accounts of their past experiences may seem problematic. One way to mediate this problem and to provide extra dimensions of enquiry would be to conduct follow-up studies in future such as observations and other forms of field studies on the current school-aged academic high achievers who are studying in the same schools as those attended by the high achieving graduates who took part in the study.

This study relied totally on the participants' narratives solicited through semi-structured interviews aiming at exploring the inner and personal experiences of the participants. Some of the interview questions were related to their personal thoughts and feelings, such as about intimacy or loneliness. In this study when language was adopted as the only tool to gain access to people's subjectivity, there existed the question of whether the language used by the interviewer in asking the questions and by the interviewees in giving their replies was accurate and adequate to fully present or represent the intended meanings. The question of how deeply qualitative research can get access to a person's inner feelings through language, and of how and to what extent language shapes and restricts people's understanding and meanings, remains open to debate. However, many other methods of enquiry both qualitative and quantitative, especially the more creative forms of enquiry which adopt methods beyond traditional verbal presentations and may have a stronger appeal to adolescents, such as visual arts, performance or other multimedia presentations, may serve to complement interview-based enquiry in future projects further exploring the inner thoughts of adolescents and school-aged children.

6.5 Future research directions

This study started in 2017 and ended in 2020, a period of unprecedented upheavals in Hong Kong and in the world caused by political, social and economic turbulence and the Covid-19 pandemic. Continuous social unrest has been occurring in Hong Kong since May 2019 and schools in Hong Kong were suspended for more than four months from January 2020 to May 2020. The impacts of school suspension and the resulting social instability are far-reaching and certainly require urgent attention. As a succession to this study with a focus on better protecting school students' wellbeing if and when similar situations occur in future, studies on how school students in Hong Kong experienced their school friendships and on how their wellbeing could be safeguarded by school friendships when schooling is severely disrupted during troubling times are some of the most timely and needed research directions which deserve immediate research attention. How did the academic high achievers in Hong Kong maintain their academic progress and talent development while lessons were held online and extra-curricular activities halted? How did academic high achievers' collaboration with school friends in academic studies differ during the period of school suspension? How did they maintain friendships with their school friends when schools were closed and public gatherings were prohibited? Did the academic high achievers engage in different kinds of socialising activities with their friends during the lockdown? How did the style, content, depth and purpose of

personal sharing and networking with school friends differ when their interactions were conducted solely online? Did they feel more lonely than they were before these crises emerged? While the entire Hong Kong society was detrimentally divided by political differences, was having similar social or political values essential for their friendships? Were their sense of inclusivity in school and of connectedness to schoolmates and other school personnel such as teachers affected by school suspension and political divisions? How did the social unrest, the pandemic and the economic downturn affect students' perceptions of academic achievement, and in particular academic high achievers' perceptions of exam achievement, life goals and sense of accomplishment? All these pressing issues require in-depth individual and interdisciplinary academic research efforts.

6.6 Closing remarks

This study has explored in-depth the school friendship experiences of some exceptional academic high achievers in Hong Kong mainstream secondary schools. By following the principles of narrative enquiry, the study has empowered the participants to tell their stories in their own unique individual voices. Using thematic analysis, the study has reported these experiences within the framework of three broad themes: friendship needs, friendship processes and contextual factors, illustrating commonalities between the participants' experiences while also recognising the complex differences among them.

The study has substantiated the effectiveness of narrative inquiry in offering a rich, nuanced understanding of research participants' lived experiences, offering a complementary perspective to the existing research into gifted education in Hong Kong, and providing insights which have implications for how educational practitioners in Hong Kong can adopt practices which will be conducive to students' friendship experiences and to their well-being.

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule for the first interview

I. Opening

A. (Establish Rapport) Hi. Thank you for meeting me today for this interview. I am indeed very happy that you agreed to take part in this research and made the effort of coming to meet me today.

B. (Purpose) As I mentioned in the information sheet, I hope this interview is a chance for me as a researcher to explore more about the personal experiences of secondary school students - in particular the significance of friendship to academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools.

C. (Motivation) I hope to use this information to help teachers and other people involved in Hong Kong education to know more about the experiences of secondary school students in Hong Kong and I hope that you will enjoy the experience of sharing your thoughts and ideas during this interview.

D. (Time Line) This first interview should take about 30-60 minutes. However, it is up to you to extend the interview time if you wish. There will be a second interview of about 20 to 30 minutes by phone or online conferencing which will be held after I have analysed the data collected so that I can ask you some further follow-up questions or new questions based on today's interview.

E. (Reminders of participant's freedom to withdraw from the interview and measures to safeguard confidentiality) Before we start, I would like to say again that you are perfectly free to withdraw from this interview or the research project at any point. In the interview, you are free to choose whether to answer any of the questions and you can make suggestions on changing the interview questions or format if you wish. If you decline to participate in this project or in answering the interview questions, there will not be any effect on our researcher-participant or former teacher-student relationship afterwards. If you feel uneasy and would like to take breaks during the interview, please let me know. Please also note that your identity and confidentiality will be strictly protected in the ways stated in the information sheet.

F. (Recording methods and data storage) I am going to use a digital audio recorder for recording this interview and I will also take notes. The recordings and written data will be stored and handled following the procedure described in the information sheet and consent form.

Before we start, do you have any questions? Is there anything else you need or would like me to clarify? Ok. Let's begin.

II. Body

A. General overview of the participant's life as a student until the end of secondary school

Question 1a:

Could you tell me what you enjoyed most in your school life? It can be any stage of your school life from kindergarten to secondary school.

Question 1b:

How about anything or any stage of your school life that you found most difficult? "Difficult" things can be related, for example, to your studies, your physical or emotional health, your personal and internal values, your social network, your relationships with peers, teachers, parents or others in society, your self-identity, social or political issues...

****If the participant finds Questions 1a and 1b too broad, ask 1c as below:**

Question 1c:

If you were to use one or two short sentences to sum up your life as a school student, what would you say?

Follow-up questions on 1c

1c.1: *You said “the one or two sentences”; can you give an example of an event that happened in your school years which can illustrate your idea?*

1c.2: (to be asked selectively) *You said you were “very happy/ bored in lessons”, in which lesson(s) did you feel really happy/bored? What were those lessons about? Who was in the class in those lessons? What were you required to do in those lessons and what did you actually do in those lessons? Why did you feel happy/ bored? When you were bored, how did you cope with this boredom? Did your classmates notice you were happy/ bored? What did the other classmates, especially those sitting in the same group with you, do in these lessons?*

or

1c.3: *You said you were “happy/bored” in school, what did being happy mean to you when you were at that stage of school life? Why did you feel you were happy/bored at that time? Can you give any examples of situations/ occasions when you felt happy/bored in your school life? What were you doing at that time? Who was with you?*

****If Section A does not involve specific mentioning of secondary school life, move to Section B as below:**

B. Narrowing down the scope of experiences, first by time/ school years, then to specific events and the people involved in these experiences.

Question 2: *From the day you began secondary school to graduation, which period is the most memorable? (Note: I would like to start with a more abstract idea by using the term “memorable” as I would like to leave the participant room for his/her own interpretation.)*

Follow-up question on Question 2:

2a: *Why is this stage of secondary school life most memorable?*

or

You said Secondary 1/2/3/4/5/6 was the most memorable? Why?

****If the participant seems that he/she does not understand the meaning of “memorable”, ask 2b as below:**

2b.1: *Which stage of your secondary school life was the most positive for you?*

2b.2: *Which stage of your secondary school life was the most challenging for you?*

Question 3: *When you recall these stage(s) of secondary school life (answers in Q2), are there any events which you can share as examples?*

or

In these stages of secondary school life (answers in Q2) and the events you have just mentioned (answers in Q3) are there any people you found important/ most relevant to you in these experiences?

C. Getting into the narrative of friendship experiences and feelings about these experiences

Question 4: *You mentioned XXX just now (in Question 3). Tell me more about him/her?*

Question 5: *What other events/ incidents can you remember that involved him/her?*

Question 6: *How did you feel when you were with him/her?*

Question 7: *Do you think he/she was your friend?*

****If the participant cannot give a clear/ detailed answer to Q4-Q7, or after Q4-Q7, ask Q8-12 as below:**

Question 8: *You mentioned XXX just now (in Question 3). Was he/she your friend? Were they your friends?*

Question 9: *How would you describe your relationship with XXX?*

Question 10: *What things did you do together?*

Question 11: *Can you tell me about a positive/important time you spent together?*

Question 12: *Were there any challenging times?*

D. Participant's personal understanding of friendship and what a good friend means

(This section helps explore the participant's personal conceptual understanding of friendship. It is put after Section C so that the participant's responses to questions 4-12 would not be affected by questions 13-14. Questions 13-14 can also be used as an elaboration of questions 7-8, or to see if there is a difference between the participant's theoretical understanding and personal experience of friendship.)

Question 13: *To you, were friends important when you were at secondary school? Why? Why not?(*avoid this question if the participant looks uncomfortable with it.)*

Question 14: *What counted as a good friend when you were at secondary school?*

E. Allowing the participant to talk about some equally or even more important elements in his/her school experience

Question 15: *Apart from friends, were there other things that you think were equally or even more important to you when you were at secondary school?*

III. Closing

A (Ending) Thank you very much. That's all I would like to ask for today. I will listen to the recording and transcribe it into a Chinese text. I will send you a copy of it and please let me know if the transcription is incorrect or if there are ideas you would like to clarify or add to today's interview.

B (Maintain Rapport) I appreciate the time you have taken for this interview about the significance of friendship to academic high achievers in Hong Kong schools. Is there anything else that you think would be useful to share for my research?

C. (Action to be taken) I should have all the information I need for today. Would it be alright to contact you probably by phone or by Skype for the second round of interview in about 2 to 4 weeks' time? When would be a convenient time for me to contact you? Thank you very much.

Transcript of a First-round Interview (Tom)

4 May 2019 Interviewer: Lee Interviewee: Tom

Lee: Ok, let's begin. The first thing to ask is: from kindergarten to secondary school, what did you enjoy most or what made you feel the happiest?

Tom: I can't remember kindergarten. So it is not possible to say I enjoyed it. The only thing I remember about my kindergarten life was going there and going home every day... routine life, then I went to primary school... primary school... was boring. But since I didn't go to a very competitive primary school and I attended afternoon sessions, the school shut after I graduated as there were not enough students. So, what happened in primary school? Boring, nothing else. There were more things going on in secondary school instead, that's all I can remember.

Lee: Most enjoyable and happiest, let's focus on secondary school.

Tom: It should be secondary school... I can't remember kindergarten. Primary school was boring.

Lee: So, what made you feel the most enjoyable and happiest in secondary school?

Tom: When I was in secondary school...um...should be going to school picnics with Ken. It was happy to go to school picnic with Ken every year. I remember we went to a training camp together in S4...

Lee: Yes. In Sai Kung.

Tom: In the camping site in Sai Kung... then in S6, we went to Ocean Park, yes, Ocean Park.

Lee: Let's focus on these two events. Why did you feel happy when you went to the training camp? Do you remember what happened?

Tom: ...Remember what happened? The weather was nice. The weather was quite nice that day. We walked up to the hills and went into the sea. It was rather fun. The weather was nice! It was fun! The whole bunch of people together. And the time we went to Ocean Park...Ocean Park... it was before the exams so it was good that we could relax before the exams.

Lee: Ok. We'll go back to it later. Could you tell me, in your student life from kindergarten to secondary school, which one period of your life was more difficult?

Tom: Actually it was also the secondary school years.

Lee: OK. Why?

Tom: Because it's difficult to study in secondary schools in Hong Kong. (laughs) In junior years, you have to study many subjects, you make a 14, 15-year-old kid to study nearly 20 subjects, facing so many people and taking so many exams! Is this reasonable? I feel it is not reasonable.

Lee: So in that period when you needed to study so many subjects. There were six years in secondary school, which stage or year was the most difficult?

Tom: Actually it should be S3, not S6.

Lee: Yes...why?

Tom: Because too many subjects, much to study, and also I needed to choose subjects for the senior years, too many people issues, it was chaotic.

Lee: ...OK...could you explain what you meant by too many subjects?

Tom: Because you have to study subjects in both arts stream and science stream. You have to study visual arts...and there were exams on all subjects and there was more studying after the exams...so there was no space. The whole person was filled up, no space.

Lee: Yes.

Tom: Actually in S6, as you are in the final year, you study on your own, in Hong Kong, this is the characteristic of Hong Kong. Studying on your own actually has less pressure. The biggest problem is in junior years, people don't trust the junior students, they believe it is good to the students to force them to study more. Actually it is not true. Junior students should study less, the less the better. Students below S3 should be allowed to daydream. It is good to them. Research also found that daydreaming is good. Studying should start from S4, just like me. I didn't study before S3, but I succeeded, so I don't feel that studying in S3 is useful. I know people who studied well in S3 but they didn't get good DSE results. Studying without thinking is useless.

Lee: OK. You said choosing subjects for senior years was also difficult. Why?

Tom: It was troublesome to choose subjects. For getting into the subject classes you want, you need to work hard on subjects which you don't want. When studying the subjects you don't like, you have to study with the people you don't know, forced to do projects together, and to talk. This means you are forced to be friends with the people you don't want to be friends with. This is the difficulty.

Lee: Yes...yes... any examples?

Tom: Liberal Studies. In S3, we had to do it...we did a board display together, annoying!

Lee: Board display?

Tom: The board display ...and presentation. After the project was done, all members of the teams had to cut out some clips for display in the school hall together.

Lee: So you felt it was difficult because of the technical issues, knowledge issues or collaboration issues?

Tom: Collaboration. The difficulty was we were forced to form groups according to the teacher's allocation. There was no time for discussion from the start to the end. The teammates didn't understand what I wanted to do and I didn't understand what they... no consensus.

Lee: OK. You also said there were people issues. Why?

Tom: Because class allocation was arbitrary. It ended up being in the same class with the person I hated most.

Lee: So how did you handle it? Any examples? How did you resolve the conflict?

Tom: So painful that I didn't want to go to school.

Lee: That means you didn't want to go to school because you didn't want to be with the person you disliked?

Tom: Not bothered to go to school.

Lee: So was the problem solved by this?

Tom: Well... at the end of the day, the reality was even though I didn't study, I still ranked top 40. So as long as I got into the science stream, everything remained normal and naturally no one complained!

Lee: The first two problems were solved once you were promoted to S4. How about the people problem?

Tom: The people problem was also resolved. The class allocation was random in the first three years, so I was put into a class with the people I disliked. It wasn't the case in S4, it was allocated by results. Although it was said to be according to exam results, it was understood that the classes with additional maths were the good classes. My friends had said that they would choose additional maths even when they didn't like it. They would rather drop A. Maths later so that they would not get into the bad classes where the learning atmosphere was bad.

Lee: So to you, when you were in S4, studying certain subjects and being with certain classmates...

Tom: Those who study...

Lee: So your people problem disappeared?

Tom: Because we focused on learning. When we focused on learning, the things we talked about were more sensible. You could say we got older, passed the subject choosing stage and parents nagged us, so we studied hard. Was it true that there were no people problems? No. A rather blunt way to put it is that just like in a work place, we don't make mistakes, we are practical, but there are still people who are calculating. There were people like that in my class. I know there were a few. They were jealous of me, they disliked me. By the end, they didn't get very good results in the exams. Just mediocre.

Lee: So those people who affected you in S3, were they still having an impact on you in S4?

Tom: Because of many incidents, the school naturally had to find ways to separate these two groups of people. The school did something to reduce conflicts.

Lee: You really think so?

Tom: I reckon that there must be some rationale behind the class allocation in S4. It must have been tampered with artificially. I feel it couldn't have been totally according to the standard mechanism.

Lee: Do you think that was a good thing to you or a bad thing?

Tom: Actually it was good but it wasn't only good for me but for the whole year group. The results show that our year group got the best results among these years. This proved that random allocation is not the best. Sometimes some deliberate adjustment to let students who are friends be in the same class, to form good learning atmosphere will lead to good exam results. Our exam results were brilliant. You could say it was only a coincidence, it's up to you.

Lee: This deliberate adjustment was the best to you? Would it also be good if you were put into a class with the people you disliked so that you would learn to deal with them?

Tom: There is nothing natural in a school. A secondary school is a very unnatural environment. There are many restrictions. To the junior students, there are rules and set time and activities. It is more realistic in the senior years, as long as you get good exam results, no one complains. This is good. Actually, as long as you study well, get high marks in exams, no one will say a word about what you

do every day. To those who can get good exam results, junior years are a waste of time, learning all those irrelevant things.

Lee: If I asked you to conclude your secondary school life in one or two sentences, what would you say?

Tom: If I have to conclude... to earn your stripes, you need to pay...

Lee: What does it mean?

Tom: These should be lyrics in Adele's song. If I need to succeed, I have to pay for it. No one can understand it, only you can.

Lee: You said "you", that means yourself right? Could you explain what you have paid?

Tom: Having to pay because to maintain a record of getting top exam results in 12 consecutive years is very difficult. Even for people who have high abilities, luck is a factor in exams. Ordinary people will have some good exam results and sometimes not so good exam results; this is normal fluctuation. If you want to keep being number 1 continuously, this means you have to remove the fluctuation in your life. This means you have to give up a lot of things of arbitrary nature. You have to plan for every next step of your life. This is a matter of sacrifice. This means I can't just go out for a walk when the weather is nice. Impossible. Even when I have holidays, I have to carefully plan which day to take a day-off from studies. Maybe I have to wait until all the exams end. My birthday is in May, but because the exams always started in June, I haven't celebrated on my birthday for years.

Lee: Does that mean you had to work very hard and to give up a lot in order to live up to your expectations and achieve your target? Your target was to achieve good exam results. So did you gain from all these?

Tom: A stable life of studying at university. When I study hard at university, I can have an even more stable life after getting a PhD.

Lee: So you think by working hard continuously, you will get a stable life, right? Good. Going back to the happy moments, you mentioned going on a school picnic in Sai Kung and you said the weather was nice and it was fun and you did a lot. So did these fun activities give you anything positive?

Tom: I saw Ken laugh. He knew how to laugh but I am the sort of person who doesn't know how to have a good laugh.

Lee: How did that happen? Let's start with when? Where? And who?

Tom: Because he knew a lot about insects, he told us which one was which that night in the camping site.

Lee: That night in Sai Kung?

Tom: He just randomly, you know there are lots in country parks, he picked up an insect and told us what it was...

Lee: Yes...yes...

Tom: I saw him laugh happily, then I laughed too.

Lee: Was it because you found what he said about the insect was funny so you were happy or because Ken laughed so you were happy?

Tom: This might sound strange, it was because he laughed so I was happy. I actually wasn't interested in insects!

Lee: So when you laughed, were there other people listening to him at the same time?

Tom: We were all friends in the same class. I remember we were Class 4B. We were in the same class and we knew each other well. That was good.

Lee: Let's go back to the scene. So he picked up ... what was it? A snail?

Tom: I can't remember.

Lee: Whatever. So Ken talked about it, there were other people there. He talked, so you laughed.

Tom: And Jimmy was counting the stars.

Lee: Jimmy counting stars? So did you feel happy? Did you like star gazing?

Tom: It was alright. I'm OK with astronomy.

Lee: So could you understand what he said?

Tom: Yes. It was not complicated, kind of science, not too difficult.

Lee: But were you interested in biology and astronomy?

Tom: I am OK with the subjects. But there is no conflict between having an interest in a subject and an interest in social interaction.

Lee: What do you mean?

Tom: To me...if I ... really had to choose, to put it simply, some people said , a rather funny way to put it... in these 6 years, I could only remember the names of schoolmates who have now entered the medical school. These people suggested that I could not remember the schoolmates who did not study well. This is really true.

Lee: You can't remember their names? What does this mean?

Tom: Because they were boring.

Lee: They were boring? You thought they were boring?

Tom: Although I could only remember the names of the schoolmates who studied well, this was only one of the factors. In fact, these schoolmates had something that made me remember them. Ken did a lot of things. He was in the Odyssey of the Mind team, he made robots. Jimmy was in the astronomy club. They didn't only study. They had something that made me remember them. I found them less boring.

Lee: Were they your friends?

Tom: You could say so. But it was only Ken who was my real friend. The other ones couldn't be counted as friends, such as Nick. He was studying at the same university here but he didn't see me. He didn't reply to me. It was outrageous! I knew his friends here. I asked his friends how Nick was. They said he was OK. Then I asked when to meet up, they said nothing... (sighs) ...I really don't understand Nick...

Lee: Let's focus on Ken. You think only Ken was your friend, right?

Tom: Among all my classmates, in these 6 years, only Ken flew to London to visit me. This is an undeniable fact. He took part in the exchange programme and made huge efforts to get the scholarship so that he could come here to visit me. Only Ken has made so much effort.

Lee: In the secondary school years, did Ken do anything that made you feel he was your real friend?

Tom: Because he understood what I thought. He knew what I worried and was concerned about.

Lee: How did you know he understood you?

Tom: Because I was willing to tell him, that's why he understood.

Lee: Could you again use when? where? who? To describe how he showed he understood you?

Tom: Because I...he was the only one who understood the conflicts between me and my enemy. He understood. He was on my side and he supported me. He helped to maintain peace to the end.

Lee: Any examples?

Tom:Because...the only one...only a handful of schoolmates were both friends of mine and my enemy's. Also, Ken was a friendly person, no one would attack him. If other people found that you picked on Ken, the whole world would be against you. Since everyone respected Ken, he could help to resolve our conflicts. Paul couldn't do this job. Although Paul was well-respected, I know he had his own motive. He had his personal interest. When I was fighting with my enemy, he took the advantage. He had self-interest. Ken didn't take any advantage from this.

Lee: What advantage could Paul gain from the conflicts between you and your enemy?

Tom: When Charles and I were competing against each other for something not related to school studies, Paul was left to keep his number 1 position in school result ranking. That's simple logic.

Lee: You think Ken didn't think in the same way as Paul?

Tom: Ken never competed to gain the top 10 ranking. He never thought about it. Sometimes, you can't be the most popular one if you are the smartest one. Even Paul couldn't. Paul was well-respected, but there was a distance between him and others. Ken told me he was still using Paul's study notes for revision even until now. This means Paul had a fixed identity. He was trapped in his own role. He could not avoid it.

Lee: Let's go back to Ken. He resolved the conflicts between you and your enemy. So how important was him in your secondary school life? If you hadn't had Ken to help you, could your school life have been different?

Tom: The difference would be that I would only have gone to school and left school every day, not talking to anyone. I would have ignored everything in school and used my time to take extra tutorial lessons. I would have attended school as usual and taken the exams. The only difference would have been not feeling I had studied in secondary school.

Lee: So now you had Ken, what was the difference?

Tom: It is that I realise I have really studied at secondary school. My school was a magical place. The senior years gave us the feeling of university life. With so much freedom, students really grow. The question is whether the students nowadays should be disciplined more, this is another issue. Many things happen by chance.

Lee: You mentioned Jimmy. Was he your friend?

Tom: So, so.

Lee: How could you describe your relationship with him?

Tom: My relationship with him... the kind of friends that I would remember to send a greeting to when Christmas comes.

Lee: How about on ordinary days?

Tom: Nothing much. We might chat a bit when we bumped into each other. But there wasn't much to talk about. We had no direct business to discuss. Students who study well are very independent. Everyone was independent. They don't rely on others.

Lee: How would you define your relationship with Ken?

Tom: I could say we were very close, very close. If they get married and asked for wedding gift money, I think I will pay for Ken, but for others, I would think about whether I could have any business affairs with them. If yes, I would pay. For Ken, I would not think at all and pay.

Lee: Why?

Tom: Because I see him as my friend.

Lee: Good. Let's focus on Ken. Was there anything difficult between you two?

Tom: Nothing in secondary school. Only because I had a problem with another guy, Ken felt uncomfortable about it. That was the only difficulty. In the end, as we respected Ken, we stopped. He was the United Nations.

Lee: How did you know he was uncomfortable?

Tom: I could see he was.

Lee: You could see?

Tom: I understood he was uncomfortable with it.

Lee: How could you tell he was uncomfortable? How was he?

Tom: I had seen how he looked when he was uncomfortable. I really understood. There are things which can't be explained.

Lee: Yes. He was feeling uncomfortable because he saw you suffer or he was kept in the middle...

Tom: He was kept in the middle.

Lee: He couldn't handle his role between you and the other guy? You think so?

Tom: I didn't want him to bear the pressure from both sides. It was only the dispute between me and my enemy. We fought for our own interests. Now when I look back, I question what we were fighting for? Only until now I realised how short-sighted and ignorant we were in secondary school.

Lee: What were you fighting for?

Tom: We competed against each other from Mathematics Olympiad to exams. I won in the exams and he won in Maths Olympiad.

Lee: You felt that he was competing with you?

Tom: Indeed he was competing with me. You think he wasn't worried? He always ranked top 10 in the year. He was the only one who continuously got that in 6 years. I only got it in the last 3 years. He must have been worried. Think about it.

Lee: So in your school life, this enemy...

Tom: Maybe Paul was another one who got the top 10 non-stop, maybe Don as well. But he wasn't in the top 3 and no one mentioned him.

Lee: I would like to ask, what was the role of this enemy in your school years?

Tom: He made my life more 3-dimensional. 3-D because you could remember the best friend was Ken, the most respected friend was Paul and the enemy was Charles. You would realise your life would become a lot simpler suddenly.

Lee: Simpler instead?

Tom: Everything has become simpler. You could give a motive to every event. Actually young people usually do so. They simplify or romanticize to simplify their imagination. When things are simplified or romanticized and things went well more efficiently, that's good. Same as efficiently daydreaming, then you could become a straight A student.

Lee: Good. You said everyone had a role. You said so very clearly. I like your ideas. So when everyone had a role, these people were your peers of your age, if not your friends, were these peers important to you in your secondary school years?

Tom: I guess they were important. If it wasn't Ken, I wouldn't be bothered to go to school when it rained.

Lee: Not going to school when it rained? Ken was the one who motivated you to go to school?

Tom: I would have still attended school on time. I wouldn't want to trouble him.

Lee: Not to trouble him?

Tom: Because I wouldn't want to bother him to take notes for me.

Lee: Did you ask him to take notes or did he do so without you asking him?

Tom: He would do so without being asked. The school didn't use email much unlike in university...

Lee: Nearly there. Two final questions. You could carry on if you like. About the people you have mentioned, to you, what are the definitions of a good friend in secondary school?

Tom: Secondary school is a very stable environment. The only problem is Paul or Jimmy, except Ken, had no individuality. What I mean is if I studied at secondary school again, I would meet people of the similar kind. I would feel they are not unique. They could never become a part of my unique life. I know they were good at studying, they had some interests, but their biggest problem was they had no individuality, not as unique as fingerprints. They were just a type, a category. They existed conceptually. Their existence was beneficial to me, but they were not really human, only very superficial. The people from secondary school I can remember are Ken, Paul and my enemy. These three people existed 3-dimensionally.

Lee: What good friends should be like?

Tom: Only Ken is my good friend because he is beyond self-interest. He is the only one who could study well and never fought against others. No self-interest was very important. Paul and I both had a concern of who got number 1. Although we knew if we didn't get number 1, we would be number 2, (sighs) we still felt....there was always a distance between us.

Lee: So you said having no self-interest was the definition

Tom: It was a condition, not a definition.

Lee: OK. So there were also people who didn't have self-interest but there were irrelevant to you, would you think they could become your good friends?

Tom: It was very difficult to have a good friend. This person had to be interesting, fun, not too stupid, not stupid, very important, and he had to be kind and accept who I was. It was very difficult to meet these four conditions.

Lee: What do you mean by accepting you?

Tom: He had to be a good listener. He had to understand the "at war" mindset of clever people.

Lee: "at war"?

Tom: To those who study well, this is a main point. If you interviewed someone who studied very well, not just quite well, but he didn't have the "at war" mindset, you must have interviewed the wrong person. You should be able to tell that they have strategic thinking.

Lee: What is "strategic thinking"?

Tom: It means they plan everything well. Just like Alan. I don't know him very well but his CV was endless! I think it is a bit too much, too insincere!

Lee: You said clever people usually have strategic thinking. Do you think the good friend of a clever person also needs to have strategic thinking?

Tom: Everyone wants to get into a good school because of the positive influence from other good students so they can do well in exams. Ken also told me that he learned from me how to study well. He said it was good to him because he became less lazy. He knew he needed to be pushed to work hard. He needed some motivation to work hard.

Lee: So to you, did your friend also need to have strategic thinking?

Tom: It is not a must to follow someone's strategic thinking. At the critical moments of life, such as choosing university courses, strategic thinking is needed. It would be unreal to say that you choose university courses based on interests and luck.

Lee: If someone had all other conditions you needed but no strategic thinking, could he be your good friend?

Tom: It depends. Why do we need strategic thinking? It is only about the actual circumstances. When you are lucky, it's OK not to think strategically. Ken got into the medical school claiming that he was lucky and blessed. Whatever he said, as long as he was lucky, it's fine. But there are people who don't depend on luck, they want to make things happen no matter what the circumstances are. This is to use strategic thinking to reduce the impact of sheer luck. They would rather do a lot more to reduce the surprises. This is a very difficult concept. There are always things happening by chance,

it is hard to ensure good performance and reduce random occurrences. People who work very hard understand how difficult this is.

Lee: I would like to ask, apart from the above, were there other elements that you found important in your secondary school life? Anything even more important than Ken?

Tom: Nothing else. If we talk about friends, only Ken.

Lee: Excluding friends, were there other things important to you in your secondary school life?

Tom: Then it would be my relationship with teachers. I heard at the time there were two sides of opinions among teachers. Some wanted me to leave and some let me stay. The latter side won and it proved that they were right because I got very good exam results for them. No one questioned the decision made at that time. Human beings are like that: when we get things done and then forget about it. If the outcome is good, no one will go back to the past and question it. When I was in the final year, no one judged me anymore. When I got good exam results, no one remembered what happened in the past. People are practical. They make judgement based on outcomes. So to those who study well, the high achievers, as they can see teachers judge them based on their academic performance, how could you accuse them for being exam-oriented? People are realistic as they only pay attention to the outcomes. How many people really care about others' individual qualities? It's a lie. At the end of the day, if you have 41, 42 points, you can get into medical schools. There are interviews, but it is only a matter of whether you could choose to attend. If I chose to study medicine, I must have been accepted. It was only I didn't want to choose it.

Lee: Your academic talent, let's say, is Maths, although I know you have many other talented areas as well. Was mathematics important to you?

Tom: Maths is actually a tool for earning a living. You go to work to make money, then you can live. It's a tool for making a living, that's it. Nothing special.

Lee: Did you find it important when you got maths awards?

Tom: It is not important now actually. In the past in school, it was important at that very moment. Young people had nothing to compete for, so they found something to be their targets. Now I know the world is big, awards are useless.

Lee: Did you enjoy the process of doing maths and developing your maths talent, regardless of the awards or competitions?

Tom: It was only about being engaged in living. Many people said we should enjoy life. But in fact, there are more boring moments in life than the enjoyable ones. Everyone is born with some conditions, some with good cards, some with not so good cards. We got the good cards, so we must play them well with the best method. This is about responsibility. This a simple belief.

Lee: Would you choose to live your life in the same way if you could do it again?

Tom: You know, as you have got the good cards, you wouldn't want to waste them. You could get your job done in the most efficient way.

Lee: About friends again, are those who were your friends in secondary school still your friends now?

Tom: I have moved away. It is only natural to get less close. But Ken is still my friend. If I ask him, he will come to visit me again. I feel he will find an excuse to come to visit me again.

Lee: Do you want them to come to visit you?

Tom: I don't mind. I will meet them for tea gatherings if they invite me. It would be even better if it was Ken!

Lee: So in your secondary school life, on the whole, were friends important to you? If you hadn't had friends, would your life have been the same? Better? Or worse?

Tom: You could say it would have been worse, although my performance would not have got worse. Performing worse was actually difficult as getting a certain grade was to some extent a matter of luck.

Lee: You said your school results would not have been affected...

Tom: But... exams were determined by luck.

Lee: But were there only exams in your secondary school life?

Tom: Yes, in Hong Kong it is.

Lee: Is it also true for your case?

Tom: I still think to a large extent exams are the main part of my school life as the target was to get into a good university. Now I had the chance to study abroad, that's a different target. But for the target of studying abroad so I had to study well, things became more complicated.

Lee: Let me ask a concluding question: in your secondary school experience, to you, how significant was friendship?

Tom: Friends are just like non-essential commodities. You won't die if you don't have friends. But if you have a companion, your life would be more meaningful. You are one of those who can study well. Would you die if you didn't have friends? No. But the last three years were an ordeal. Time passed more easily if there were friends to fight together when studying non-stop every day. That's why there were two considerations of having friends: 1. To make my life better, this was a main reason I wanted friends in school. But only Ken was beyond this consideration. At the crucial moments, I would have given up my own revision time to help him get his things done. It was only Ken.

Lee: Thank you very much. Anything you would like to ask me?

Tom: No need to record now....

Appendix 2

Questions for second round interview with Mary

Leadership roles/co-working in school events/Extra-curricular activities	1. Did you take part in any ECAs or leadership roles, apart from the Fellowship, in the senior forms when you had more friends and were more engaged in your class?
Stress	2. How did you handle your stress in the junior forms when you found that you had to use English to study all subjects and you had no real friends in the new school environment? 3. How did you handle the exam stress before HKDSE?
Isolation/ Loneliness/Companionship	4. You said sometimes you preferred sitting alone daydreaming during recess in junior forms. Did you feel better being alone like that rather than staying with your two friends, the arrogant one and the soft one? 5. Did you feel lonely when you chose to sit alone and daydream in these situations?
Mutual support	6. You said you saw your arrogant friend in junior forms being bullied. Did you do anything when that happened? 7. You also mentioned you stayed with this arrogant girl because you couldn't bear seeing her being so poor. How did she react to your support? Do you think that she knew that you tried to support her?
Self-disclosure/Intimacy	8. You said you only shared your secrets with one friend and you felt warm when a schoolmate called you by your Chinese first name. What does "intimacy" mean to you? Do you think "intimacy" was important in friendship in your secondary school life?
Exclusivity	9. If you could have chosen, do you think you would have preferred having a stable and fixed group of friends or having a more inclusive, growing friend circle in your secondary school life? Why?

Teachers	10. Apart from the teachers in the Fellowship, were there other teachers who had an impact on you in secondary school?
High achiever label/ability grouping	11. Do you think ability grouping, say attending lessons according to the allocated sets, was a good thing? How did it affect your friendship experience? 12. You said being a high achiever made you become more popular. Did you feel being more popular meant having more friends in secondary school?
Self-understanding/ self-identity	13. Did your friends in secondary school have an impact on your identity, values or self-understanding, such as knowing more about your own likes or dislikes, your personal strengths or weaknesses?

Other questions:

14. You mentioned your classmates who you chatted with in lessons never found you on Facebook. Was this (lack of) exchange on social media important to you?
15. You mentioned the boys who were rather odd were not bullied in your class in senior years. What would have been the reasons for such a change of social dynamics?
16. You said the best friend you had in the senior years was a girl who had never been badmouthed by others. Did you think not being badmouthed by others was an important marker of a good personality in your secondary school? Do you think you would make friends with people who had a bad reputation or were badmouthed by others?

Appendix 3

First-round Interview with Jeff

Interviewee: Jeff Interviewer: Lee

Date: 2 July 2019 2:00 pm

Lee: Ok. Jeff, as I have said the purpose of today's meeting is to find out more about the importance of friendship in your school experience. Let's start. If I asked you to sum up your learning experience in a few words or sentences, your secondary school life, what would you say?

Jeff: A few words... It's er... er.. freedom, but not too much pressure... let me explain a bit. I feel it is relatively, in learning, I could have the freedom to choose what I wanted to learn about. There were not many people who would restrict my choice. Or it would mean there were not many targets. The school, not too much pressure. The reason I said so is that now at university, I have a target. I have the incentive to go towards a target. But at school, I felt I didn't know what I was doing. I had such a feeling.

Lee: You mean when you were at secondary school, you felt free, no pressure but didn't know what you were doing?

Jeff: Yes. No pressure, in a negative way. No target.

Lee: There were a few years from S1 to S6. So from the first year when you entered this school to the end, did you have the same feeling of not having any pressure, no target and being very free?

Jeff: Maybe in learning knowledge, there were some minor changes. In senior years, I realized what I was interested in and what I was good at. But in junior years, I liked reading Chinese history, but now I am not interested in it. It was a feeling of exploration. Trying something new, then realizing it wasn't much fun and then trying another thing...

Lee: What you have said is mainly about your learning. Was learning or acquiring knowledge the most important thing in your 6 years of secondary school life?

Jeff: It is one part of learning more about myself. But it is an overall conclusion on my life. I think teenagers want to find out what they want to do. I myself like to know more about knowledge. Knowledge learning is a part of learning about myself. I want to know what I want to do. This is a way to learn about myself.

Lee: In your secondary school life, what are the things that made you happy or the happiest?

Jeff: In Secondary 4, I liked to do research and teach others. I was a Physics Olympiad tutor to teach a group of students something I liked. This helped both me and the students grow. I really like, like thinking about something and teaching others so that they understand. This feeling is very enjoyable.

Lee: In your school life, were there any difficult moments?

Jeff: Er...a good question. I think it was about getting along with others. Some people say a school is a microcosm of society. There are many different people. I would say I am the kind of person who doesn't like doing things behind others' backs. In my school life, I came across these incidents more than once. When it happened, I felt really under pressure and didn't know what to do as I was shy and I didn't like facing others for these interactions.

Lee: Could you explain more clearly?

Jeff: In S4, I was in an activity, I don't want to be too specific. I was one of the leaders. The teacher-in-charge, or we called him a coach, didn't like the way I did things. He said a lot of negative things behind my back. He did many things to get rid of me. But when he saw me, he would pretend to be another person. I felt really lost and didn't know what to do. It was the first time I came across such things. It was inevitable to feel unhappy but this incident also inspired me.

Lee: You mentioned your unhappy relationship with a coach. Do you consider this coach as your friend?

Jeff: No. I wouldn't say so.

Lee: How about your relationship with your friends? Did you have similar issues with your friends?

Jeff: Yes. Similar incidents also happened in S6 with my friends. There were friends who had been my friends for many years but who suddenly said something that shocked me as it wasn't real; what he said didn't happen. At that time, as I had experienced a similar incident before, I knew people would do that sort of things, so I didn't react as strongly as before.

Lee: Let's focus on the situation in S6, if you don't mind. The incident that happened in S6 was between you and a friend of your year group?

Jeff: Yes. Same year group, same class.

Lee: So your relationship with him was ok or rather close?

Jeff: We met from S1 onwards. We were rather close as our academic results were similar and we talked about many things. We lived near each other and took the same bus to school. But, ... I tried to analyse what actually happened to find out why he did and his rationale. But I felt unhappy.

Lee: What actually happened? Could you say a bit more?

Jeff: In S6, I applied for the Prince Philip Scholarship. My parents wanted me to study abroad. At first I wanted to go to the US. But because of the scholarship, and I considered the needs of my family, so I also applied for universities in the UK. But that friend said I was money-minded, he said I only wanted the scholarship and he also said something about the things in the past. He also said I only took up deputy positions in many clubs and societies because I only wanted the titles but not the responsibility. There were many allegations. I was shocked.

Lee: How did you find out? He probably didn't say it in front of you?

Jeff: Many classmates understood I wasn't like that so they told me. My solution finally was to talk about it with him and find out what happened. It was sorted and I told him my standpoint. But our friendship ended. But at least I took an active role in explaining my standpoint.

Lee: So when you talked to him, were you confronting him or were you calm?

Jeff: Calm. It was a face-to-face talk after school.

Lee: Did you take the initiative to invite him to have this talk?

Jeff: I asked him.

Lee: How did you feel about it in the entire experience?

Jeff: I was very, very disappointed. We knew each other for 6 years. To have such kind of confrontation, our friendship was put into a secondary consideration. Yes, it was more disappointment than hatred.

Lee: Did this incident have an impact on your feelings about friends?

Jeff: I found that the friendships I formed from S4 and S5... I became more mature in forming friendship. I knew better who I am and who I could make friends with and who were the ones I could chat with. There weren't many. But I could distinguish them better. Sometimes if we happened to have similar interests, we could chat for a while. But some of them could be for more personal conversations, such as about our family, different levels. I could distinguish better. This incident made me understand that there are many different levels.

Lee: How about before S6, how about when you were in junior forms? Did you have this concept?

Jeff: People say a friendship circle expands outwards in layers. I didn't have such a strong feeling at that time.

Lee: So in junior forms, your friendship circle was vague.

Jeff: More vague. I didn't have such feelings. When I grew older, I started to feel which layer my friends belonged to.

Lee: So about the friends you had in junior forms, why did they become your friends?

Jeff: It was about interests first, and the culture in my school was rather interesting. In society, people are defined by their political stance or money. I feel that in my school, the social class was defined by academic achievements. You only chat with a certain group of people and know that group of people better. Then we became friends. But I didn't know what sort of friends they were.

Lee: So what did you normally do with these friends, the ones you got closer to because of academic achievements?

Jeff: Usually we talked about schoolwork or interests. We had similar interests. We liked science. We studied together, read books together and played similar things. We did things for leisure too but it was not the most common interaction we had as friends.

Lee: So could you say your friends in junior forms were those who shared similar academic interests and activities with you? Could you say this was why friendship was important to you in the junior forms?

Jeff: You could say so.

Lee: So the importance here was that they accompanied you or they actually gave you some kind of benefits?

Jeff: I, let's talk about something else first. I once took part in a personality test. I found that the friends I wanted to make had to allow knowledge interactions. It was very important to me. Without that, I wouldn't have the incentive to form an interaction with a person, it's knowledge exchange or information exchange.

Lee: So if the friend who could explore Physics with you, and another friend who would go to the cinema to watch the Spiderman with you, which one would you choose?

Jeff: I would choose the Physics one. It might not be academic related. It would be about an incident or learning more about myself, the information I could get from it. Sometimes I could not observe what was actually going on, but some friends could do so. They could concretely describe what was happening and I treasured this kind of friendship a lot.

Lee: You treasured these friends because you felt happy? Or you felt you were understood? In what way did you feel they were good?

Jeff: I think they could enrich my own understanding of myself, you may put it that way. It was obviously a happy feeling but this was only secondary. The main point was to find out who I am, what I like and what I dislike. This could inspire me a lot.

Lee: You had these friends in S1 to S5. But they were, as you said, rather vaguely defined. But after the incident in S6, you learnt to define friends more clearly. Some were outside of the circle and some were more in the centre. Could you tell me how different these two groups of friends were?

Jeff: With those in the centre, I think the difference is mainly as I said it was the interactions of knowledge or whether they could make me have more inspirations about myself. These people were the closest to me. The other ones were more about I knew more about them or there was less information exchange between us.

Lee: So in S6, in the unhappy incident you mentioned, you realized a friend could have a misunderstanding or badmouth you behind your back. How did such an incident affect your friendship circle?

Jeff: It was a one-off incident that didn't cause a big drop in my perception of this friend. In fact, it was a gradual feeling that he could not help me think about myself. We only stayed on the level of studying together and were only concerned about our academic results. Gradually, I understood the changes. The incident was a trigger that inspired me to draw a clear line. I found that this incident made me define a clear line. In S1 to S5, there was also some gradual increase in my understanding of this friend, say, this friend might just be focusing on academic work, not academic work, but on school results, and did not talk about other things. He might not give any suggestions to me. So was he actually important to me? I started to feel that I didn't care much about him.

Lee: You mentioned you enjoyed academic exchange with others. Was it the feeling of being understood? Did you need a person to be your soulmate, a person who understands what you think instead of purely a person for academic exchange?

Jeff: You mean whether the friends I made had to understand me?

Lee: Yes. Were the emotional benefits from making a friend important to you? Did you need the feeling of companionship? Were being understood and companionship important?

Jeff:to a certain extent, very important. Because I am a rather introverted person. I can't specifically explain how a friend could give me emotional satisfaction or that sort of understanding. I think I can't explain it. But when he understood me, and gave me some suggestions, I knew he understood me; I felt happy.

Lee: You mentioned your friendship began from academic results or interests, similar learning experiences. Does that mean these are the preconditions of making friends and then being understood and companionship? Say, a person who didn't like the academic

areas which you were interested in, could this person would become your friend and develop companionship with you?

Jeff: I think at the beginning, a basic level of knowledge and intellectual exchange was needed.

Lee: You mentioned a rather unhappy incident. Were there some happier friendship experiences?

Jeff: Yes, there were lots. I think ... Pun and Lai were two good friends. Pun was my tutor. We became close because of Physics. When I encountered that unhappy incident in S4, Pun helped me and thought of ways to solve the problem. At that time, having someone who understood me was very rare. Lai was a very good listener. I had quite a lot of emotional issues. My family knew but they couldn't give me many suggestions. But Lai could listen and give me suggestions. Both Pun and Lai started academic interactions.

Lee: Pun was one year older than you and Lai was in the same year group as you, right?

Jeff: Yes.

Lee: Let's talk about them one by one. Pun was older than you and he helped you academically and helped you resolve your unhappy incident. How did you make him know and understand your situation? Any specific examples?

Jeff: That incident was related to the Music Team. Pun and I were both in the Orchestra. In S3, I was arranged to take part in the Physics Olympiad. So we started to know each other better. In S4, the incident happened. At that time, Pun was the chairperson of the Music Society. Many things involved him. So I asked him whether he knew what was going on, whether he would mind if I told him my problems and if he would give me some suggestions. He said OK. So we realized there were many other problems related to my problems.

Lee: So Pun gave you suggestions only or he actually handled the problems as a middle man? Did he only support you at the back?

Jeff: I think he subtly did a lot. For example, a teacher did something. We were very unhappy. Actually there were two teachers who did similar things which really crossed the line. But we discussed our future plans together in a group and showed that we hoped, as students, could achieve certain goals and hoped that the coaches could let us try out our plans first. So Pun didn't just give me suggestions. We worked together in the whole team of the Music Society to correct the unhealthy culture.

Lee: Did you feel Pun was your friend or a schoolmate one year older than you?

Jeff: A friend.

Lee: Apart from in the Music Society, were there other interactions between you and Pun?

Jeff: We were Physics Olympiad tutors. We coached the new members every year and gave them suggestions. We also worked with the new members to run the team.

Lee: It sounds like these were activity-based topics. Did you two talk about anything personal?

Jeff: ...Yes. Some personal topics. For example...some basic family issues, such as my brother's problems, I would share with him. But it was mainly intellectual or activity-related topics.

Lee: You also mentioned family issues with him but they were not the main topics.

Jeff: We preferred doing things and playing together.

Lee: Let's talk about Lai. He was in your year group.

Jeff: Lai was a good listener. When I had many questions especially when I was in S5, Pun was busy with his own studies, Lai was the chairperson of the Music Society. The problems I had in the Music Society were less serious in S5, but there were issues I came across in the Prefect Team. There were some internal, darker issues which involved a lot of competition or unhappy encounters. Not many people could share with me. But Lai was willing to listen to me and gave me concrete suggestions, only suggestions but not to take action. This was very different from what Pun did.

Lee: How come Lai could share with you? What qualities did he have so that he could do so?

Jeff: Compared to others, he was more willing to listen. Some people had their own stance. Or...he ...it wasn't just me he could talk to. He could talk with many people and to sit down to chat. You could say he was a person with interesting thinking, and strong moral values. The suggestions he gave might not be practical. But I felt he understood what I was concerned about...as we are both [religious]. Many issues I was struggling with were moral issues in the Prefect Team. It could be a bit dark. He could give me some... for example what I should not do certain things because... as other people might not have such strong moral concepts and can be a good listener.

Lee: Strong moral values means he had a clear idea of what is right and what is wrong based on moral principles?

Jeff: And being very firm about them.

Lee: You think you were the same as him or you learnt something that you originally weren't aware of?

Jeff: I think it was the latter. I myself, despite being [religious], I am a science person. I questioned certainty and sometimes intentionally or unintentionally committed certain human acts, such as I don't like you, so I report you to the teacher...Something rather childish and that should not be done in principle. But Lai would stop me, try to understand and try to listen and suggest other ways to handle the matter.

Lee: Lai, although he was in the same age with you, did you find that he was emotionally or morally more mature than you?

Jeff: A lot stronger actually.

Lee: Did you enjoy having his company?

Jeff: Yes. Intellectually, he asked me many questions. But emotionally I was rather weak. Sometimes when I felt unsure, he would give me a lot of guidance.

Lee: You said intellectually, he asked you many things. So that means in comparison, his academic inputs were fewer than his emotional inputs.

Jeff: Yes. You could say so.

Lee: But you said earlier that your friends needed to have common interests with you. How about Lai?

Jeff: Actually, he also came to the Physics Olympiad to support me. He came to listen to my teaching. He was my student. He came to know more about Physics but he was as passionate as Pun. He tried to listen as he also wanted to know. In other subjects, such as Biology, he had many questions, I tried to answer his questions.

Lee: Good answers. I would like to ask, did your identity of being a high achiever affect the way you made friends? Or did it make your friendship experiences unique?

Jeff: You could say it defined how I made friends. In such a position, that's very good academic results and holding many school positions, people would look up to me. There were three types of people I didn't want to make friends with at all: those who tried to please me, those who wanted to take advantages from me and those who didn't want to interact with me as they found me too strong. So, those who I could befriend with, were those who wanted to learn from me or get something from me.

Lee: This was your perception, right?

Jeff: Yes. It was my perception and my friends also observed such situations. The positive side was that the most able schoolmates I knew were those who were a bit silly. They treated others with a true heart, although I would also say I had reservations about them. Only one or two of them were really genuine friends. There was a culture of worshipping the stronger ones and despising the weaker ones. I felt helpless about such a phenomenon in society.

Lee: You said your best friends were a bit silly. Were they those who got top school results?

Jeff: Not the top of the top, but in some ways they were very strong, maybe stronger than me or similar to me. So I could learn something from them and they could learn something from me. This kind of interaction helped me to make the best friends.

Lee: You meant your best friends... actually you were not as strong as them in some areas. So you were inspired by them and thus you felt they didn't just take advantage of you. So you felt more relaxed when you made friends with them, right? You could lower your guard?

Jeff: You could say so. I tried... I made friends with them, the focus was the interaction. I guess I could feel it when they approached me, the gut feeling or the sixth sense, I could feel they did not come for getting some benefits, although we both gained. I think we were both genuine. I must emphasize this point. I can't qualitatively explain it, it was just a feeling.

Lee: I guess the complexity about friendship lies in this feeling. That's why I am doing this research. Thank you for your great answers. This research is about the significance of friendship to secondary school students. If I asked you how to define friendship and friends conceptually, what would you say? What do friends really mean?

Jeff: I myself feel... it is an important tool to learn more about myself. I shouldn't say a "tool"... one of the ways to learn more about myself which can give me certain emotional satisfaction. I am the INTP type according to the Myers-Briggs' personality test.

Lee: ...Say that again? Oh yes. I have read this research too.

Jeff: "I" means Intuition... what I value apart from the information exchange, emotional satisfaction is an irreplaceable element.

Lee: I remember you once told me as you were more able academically, you felt bored in lessons. Could you explain more?

Jeff: For example, Physics, Maths Chemistry, Biology... English was OK but Chinese and Liberal Studies were not my interest. Chemistry, Biology and Physics and Maths, I felt I had to force myself to listen to something I had heard before and after listening to the explanations, I felt I had already understood that all before. What was the point for me if I didn't gain anything new? I had such a feeling.

Lee: At the time, some people would stay in the seat and find their own ways to deal with their emotional or academic needs. How about you?

Jeff: In my case, it was more likely... as my parents always didn't want me to jump classes or have IQ tests...they wanted me to have better social skills. They hoped I could mix well with my peers and be a good role model. So I was forced to sit in the class to listen like a good student. I kind of forced myself to do that. If you asked me, honestly, I didn't want to do that.

Lee: If you could choose, what would you want to do in those lessons?

Jeff: Honestly, I would read my own books or get into university earlier so that some people can teach me. There were too many restrictions.

Lee: So if you were given a chance to choose again, you'd want to do that, right?

Jeff: ...A bit, but I think half, half. I do not regret walking on this path. Now I am at Cambridge, the people study so madly that their social life can be very weak. We all only have one life, doing this may not be enjoyable. I feel people want to try many things in their limited life. So I have no regrets about choosing this path.

Lee: "Choosing this path" means jumping classes or not jumping classes?

Jeff: I don't regret not jumping classes, but also I don't totally dislike the idea of doing so.

Lee: Understood. If you could choose, should your friends be older or have a higher intellectual capacity? More like intellectual friends rather than same age peers?

Jeff: Yes. I had rather few schoolmates of the same age who I knew very well, compared to other students.

Lee: Good. Last question now. Apart from friendship, were there other things that were important in your school life?

Jeff: ...Other interests... that trained me to become who I am.

Lee: Training you to become who you are?

Jeff: Yes, such as being more responsible and having strong self-control. I developed many interests in secondary school, but the most influential qualities to me now were the self-control and the ability to listen to others and express my opinions, the ability to appreciate other people's different views, but not the ability. These were the qualities I developed in my secondary school life.

Lee: In which areas could you develop these qualities?

Jeff: Self-control.... A good question... people or classmates often praised me for having these qualities. Maybe compared to my brother, when I saw him not doing well, I needed to set a good example for him. He is 5 years younger than me - just a primary school kid - so I needed to be a role model. In school, I also set a good example, showing strong self-control. About listening to others, as a prefect, sometimes people had pre-assumptions, and felt

someone was wrong without listening. So I learned to reflect to see what was right and wrong. These were what I learned in secondary school through activities and interests, such as playing the piano. These were very important life lessons.

Lee: Good. Thank you very much for your answers. They were very good data. Are there any questions you would like to ask me?

Jeff: ...Not for now.

Analytical memos (16 August 2019)

Main points of Jeff's interview

1. Jeff found the junior secondary school years was free and aimless. He felt not having a clear learning goal was relaxing in a negative way.
2. He was keen on acquiring knowledge, on both academic growth and self-understanding. He wanted to engage in activities that facilitated his further understanding of certain academic subjects and himself. As he was a very academic-oriented person, he said academic enquiry was part of his self-identity exploration.
3. Jeff thought that the friends he had should shared similar interests and that they had information/ knowledge exchange.
4. He had some friends who were classmates. They started their friendships based on their academic interests and abilities. But they fell out as he found his friends badmouthing him behind his back.
5. He confronted this friend to clarify his stance. Their friendship ended. But to Jeff, their friendship ended, not just merely because of the incident in 3 but it was more of a gradual process of realizing that this friend only cared about exam results but not Jeff as a person or a friend.
6. He mentioned two genuine friends he had was Pun and Lai. Pun was a year older than him. Both of them were the student leaders of the Orchestra and the Physics Olympiad Team. Pun helped Jeff to handle some interpersonal disputes with the teachers involved in the Orchestra. Jeff found Pun helpful as they worked together to resolve the disputes. Lai was in the same year group with him but not in the same class. Lai had a lower academic ability than him but Lai was a student with strong moral discipline. Academically Jeff helped Lai and socially Lai helped Jeff as he could give Jeff clear and firm moral guidance when Jeff experienced confusion and dilemma in handling interpersonal issues, especially when he performed the duty as a discipline prefect. He also found Lai a very good listener.
7. Jeff seemed to find people who approached him or wanted to befriend with him wanted to take advantage of his academic abilities. He felt many friends only wanted to befriend with him because of his academic achievements. He only had very few true friends that he could confide to personally. He said his high achiever label defined his friendship development.
8. Jeff admitted he found some of the lessons meaningless as he had already understood the concepts the teachers taught. He would rather be given the freedom to do his own things or read his own books. But he forced himself to be attentive to teachers in class as his parents wanted him to behave like a role model for others, especially to his younger brother.
9. He said although he didn't like that feeling of boredom, he still preferred staying in the same year group. As he is now in university studying a very demanding programme, he felt that it had been a right decision to stay in the same year group so that he had had the experience of having a life not so academic-focused before studying at university.
10. Jeff said one crucial part of his secondary school life was that he developed certain

personal qualities such as self-control, ability to listen to others and appreciate others' opinions. He thought that he developed these qualities through being a school prefect. (I should ask him to clarify in the next interview.)

My own notes:

Jeff was never my student but I saw him on many occasions such as in the School Open Days, Speech Days, etc. on which he led the prefect team or the orchestra. He always looked rather tense, rushing around looking a bit anxious. he was an outstanding student throughout his school life. Unlike other top students in our school, he chose a very different path to study natural sciences in the UK when his exam scores certainly would have allowed him to get into any more competitive university programmes such as medicine. His passion for natural sciences was most obvious when he swiftly declined the invitation from the faculty of medicine of one of the universities which was made exclusively for him after his public exam results were reported in the news. (After the interview, he told me that his mother who worked in a medical field, was strongly against him studying medicine as she herself had had a lot of negative experiences in hospital.) His focused passion in knowledge enquiry, superseding the common pragmatic goals for studying a professional degree which can guarantee a more stable path to affluence indicates Jeff's values and his difference from his peers . In fact, Lai, one of the best friends Jeff mentioned, was admitted to the medicine programme in HK. Jeff's decision to study natural sciences overseas shows how academic exploration was more important to him than friendship and future stability.

I found his anxious behavior I witnessed in school and his courageous act of choosing a relatively less popular academic path were two of the most unique characteristics of this participant. The anxiety he had could have been brought by his self-imposed expectation of himself being a role model or maybe the anxiety came from the mistrust he had after certain unhappy incidents with his former friends and teachers.

Appendix 4

Profile of Jeff

Jeff was a student who showed superb academic abilities since he began attending formal schooling. Throughout his secondary school years in a top boys' school in Hong Kong, he behaved and performed as a model student with excellent exam results, very serious attitude to learning and strong devotion to the school orchestra, the Physics Club and the Prefect Board. He has been trusted with a wide range of leadership duties in the school. However, teachers commented that Jeff seemed to have taken his academic performance too seriously. In the interview, he also admitted that he was troubled by certain emotional issues throughout his school years. After studying 6 years in the school, he did brilliantly in the HKDSE exam and he received a major scholarship and is now studying in the UK.

Significance of friendship to Jeff's academic experience in secondary school

Knowledge acquisition constitutes self understanding

To Jeff, academic learning, or in other words knowledge acquisition, led to learning more about himself.

"I myself like to know more about knowledge. Knowledge learning is a part of learning about myself."

When he was asked to choose between going out to watch a film or discussing academic questions with a friend, he without hesitation chose the latter:

Lee: So if the friend who could explore Physics with you, and another friend who would go to the cinema to watch the Spiderman with you, which one would you choose?

Jeff: I would choose the Physics one. It might not be academic related. It would be about an incident or learning more about myself, the information I could get from it.

Advanced academic learning beyond lessons with schoolmates sharing similar academic passion enriched his intellectual development

Jeff repeatedly mentioned that knowledge acquisition was of paramount importance to him because being knowledgeable was a significant part of his identity, both as regarded by himself and perceived by others. To consolidate his academic development, he did not only rely on teachers' everyday teaching in lessons. In fact, he found the lessons boring as he already had a good grasp of the knowledge taught prior to the lessons. He made great efforts in further developing his academic talents through taking part in the Physics Olympiad Club of the school in which he not only participated in competitions but also worked as a tutor for junior schoolmates to teach them advanced Physics knowledge. He found teaching younger schoolmates an academically enriching and emotional satisfying experience:

I was a Physics Olympiad tutor to teach a group of students something I liked. This helped both me and the students grow. I really like, like thinking about something and teaching others so that they understand. This feeling is very enjoyable.

Although the younger schoolmates he coached might not be considered as his friends, another senior form student Pun, who was a year older and at first was Jeff's tutor in Physics Olympiad training was regarded by Jeff as one of the best friends he had in his secondary school life. Although in the interview Jeff mainly focused on talking about how Pun helped him to handle interpersonal disputes, Pun was clearly a friend who matched Jeff's criterion of having an academic friend who shared similar passion in Physics.

Pun was my tutor. We became close because of Physics.

Jeff's friendship with Pun began with their passion for academic learning. Their super talents in Physics formed the basis of their close friendship. In this sense, Pun was an intellectual friend who had a significant influence on Jeff's academic development.

Like Pun, other good friends Jeff had in secondary school years were those who could inspire him academically. He said:

(Some of his best friends) in some ways they were very strong (academically), maybe stronger than me or similar to me. So I could learn something from them and they could learn something from me. This kind of interaction helped me to make the best friends.

Performing the role of a teacher to his good friend

Having said that, it was interesting that another good friend mentioned by Jeff was Lai. Unlike Pun, Lai was seen as a friend although he had lower academic prowess. The academic interactions Jeff and Lai had were more about Jeff being Lai's teacher helping Lai with his studies.

Actually, he also came to the Physics Olympiad to support me. He came to listen to my teaching. He was my student. He came to know more about Physics but he was not as passionate as Pun. He tried to listen as he also wanted to know. In other subjects, such as Biology, he had many questions, I tried to answer his questions.

In his friendship with Lai, Jeff's academic strengths over Lai led to a different form of friendship interactions in which Jeff was the giver rather than the receiver of academic gain.

Reciprocal relationship between academic learning and friendship experience

To Jeff, outstanding academic achievements and friendship had an interdependent connection: his academic achievements were both the outcomes and causes of forming good friendships with certain types of schoolmates. He admitted that his outstanding academic performance and the label of being a "high achiever" defined his friendship circle in two ways: he perceived that some schoolmates wanted to befriend him because of their admiration to his academic strengths while he also preferred befriending with schoolmates who had similar academic interests as he recognised that pursuit of knowledge was a crucial aim of his life.

You could say it (being an academic high achiever) defined how I made friends. In such a position, that's very good academic results and holding many school positions, people would look up to me.

With those in the centre (of the friendship circle), I think the difference is mainly as I said it was the interactions of knowledge or whether they could make me have more inspirations about myself.

Significance of friendship to Jeff's personal development in secondary school

Friendship was important for learning more about himself

Jeff said repeatedly that "learning about myself" or finding out who he is was important to him. To Jeff, apart from having subject-related academic exchange with his schoolmates, a fulfilling friendship was the one with friends which could lead to learning more about himself as a person:

I think they could enrich my own understanding of myself... The main point was to find out who I am, what I like and what I dislike. This could inspire me a lot.

I myself feel... (friendship) is an important tool to learn more about myself. I shouldn't say a "tool"... one of the ways to learn more about myself

A good friend with firm moral values guided Jeff's personal growth

One example was Jeff's peer Lai. Jeff saw him as a special friend who helped him to develop maturity and clear moral values. When he was confused by complex interpersonal situations, Lai listened to Jeff and gave him clear moral guidance with his firm [religious] values.

(Lai) was a person with interesting thinking, and strong moral values. The suggestions he gave might not be practical. But I felt he understood what I was concerned about...as we are both [religious]. Many issues I was struggling with were moral issues in the Prefect Team. It could be a bit dark. He could give me some... for example what I should not do certain things because... as other people might not have such strong moral concepts and can be a good listener.

Being understood and companionship led to happiness

Jeff said that although he wanted a friend who could inspire him and give him suggestions, he was happy when he felt he was simply being understood. The sense of companionship was very important to him:

What I value apart from the information exchange, emotional satisfaction is an irreplaceable element. Because I am a rather introverted person. I can't specifically explain how a friend could give me emotional satisfaction or that sort of understanding. I think I can't explain it. But when he understood me, and gave me some suggestions, I knew he understood me; I felt happy.

Feeling being understood was a main source of happiness to Jeff. He found such a feeling with both Pun and Lai. Facing complex inter-personal disputes at school, Jeff confided in Pun and Lai and asked for their advice. By doing so, he felt his own weakness in social interactions was compensated for by the guidance of his best friends:

...emotionally I was rather weak. Sometimes when I felt unsure, he (Lai) would give me a lot of guidance.

Appendix 5

Extracts of coding: Mary's first-round interview

[illegible]

Mary: The other one was a quiet and soft girl .	Quiet and soft	Preferred personality traits for friendship	
Lee: Was she also a newcomer?			
Mary: Yes. We three were all newcomers.	newcomers	Shared personal backgrounds	
Lee: So you had to be with them. How did you get along with these two classmates?			
Mary: Er... how to get along, maybe in lunch time, we had a rather interesting timetable that we always had 20 minutes between two lessons and we only had five lessons. We then went to buy snacks at the tuckshop together and we bought lunch and sat down together to eat . The soft one and I are still good friends until now. The arrogant one left the school later as she couldn't stand the bullying.	Having lunch together good friends until now the arrogant one left	Leisure activities Stability	Having lunch together seems to be a crucial part of socialising among all participants. (This might therefore lead to a different friendship experience of the students with chronic diseases who could not eat out as often.)
Lee: You mentioned in those 20-minute breaks, did you three naturally get together?			
Mary: Actually no. Sometimes I sat alone and daydreamed in my seat .	Sat alone	Loneliness	She didn't seem to fully enjoy the company of these two friends. They were only needed for a practical/ necessary reason.

Appendix 6

Second interview with Jeff

Interviewer: Lee Interviewee: Jeff

Lee: Hi. Thank you for taking part in this interview. I will ask you questions based on the themes I sent to you earlier. If there are things you would like to ask me or if you want to stop, just let me know. Is that OK?

Jeff: Yes. OK.

Lee: I have processed the data in the first round I have come up with some ideas. One of them is that teenagers develop friendships for different needs or for different reasons. On the whole, although not always a must, one of these is practical needs - you need someone to work together or do things together; the second one is emotional needs, the last one maybe for those older teenagers, they find friend can help their self-development or self-exploration. Did these situations occur in your secondary school life? You might repeat what you said in the first round or maybe say something that contrasts with it. It would be alright, just say whatever you like.

Jeff: I can't quite recall what I said in the first interview. I think these are reasonable. For practical needs, sometimes we hanged out and used to relax. To me, to me mainly it was knowledge exchange. I think I mentioned a lot about it in the first interview. The second type, of course like other people, I need to hang out and play. I can't specify, but most people play cards or computer games with friends. I did those things too, but I didn't only have one side to it. To different people, or in most cases, with the friends of my year group that I had in secondary school, I played with them more. But with those who were from different age groups, I had more knowledge exchange with them instead. Does this sound sensible? If I drew a pie chart, the proportion of practical needs, for same age peers, it would be more about playing together, compared with those of different ages. Emotionally, this was certain. Especially as I was the deputy head prefect, I encountered a lot of issues. It could be more than among schoolmates. Sometimes there were disputes among schoolmates. Sometimes there were issues related to teachers and schoolmates and our team was involved. In these cases, I talked to my close friends about them. When I encountered some issues, I felt better when I talked about it. One example was at a function, a teacher scolded us. His comments were not unreasonable, but he was too harsh. We were really lost and angry. After the function, I sat down and talked about it with my friends. It was a kind of comfort and a normal form of mutual emotional reliance. As for self-understanding, it was certainly the case and it was very important to me. To me, making friends, apart from having a chat with someone, all sorts of interaction with people, maybe it sounds selfish, the ultimate target for a teenager in the teenage stage is to find out who I am, what sort of person I am. So through knowledge exchange or classmates' comments, I sometimes deliberately asked them: "what kind of person do you think I am?", or I used different methods to find out. I feel when we talked about these issues, I developed a different way of thinking. Any specific examples...

Lee: I remember you mentioned quite a lot about it in the first interview. Do you have anything new to add?

Jeff: I can't quite remember what I said before...maybe...for example being the Deputy Head. At the end when the principal chose the Head Prefect, I questioned why I wasn't chosen to be the Head Prefect. At that time, I asked some of my close friends. That helped me to understand who I was a

lot more, compared to Yuen, the Head Prefect. And also, I learned about why I could perform in this position but other people couldn't do it, not even Yuen. So I learned more about my own qualities.

Lee: I heard from you that when you were unhappy, you would talk about it with your friends, such as about not being selected for Head Prefect. In the first interview, you mentioned you found Pun and Lai to discuss a few issues. I've got an impression that you liked talking about your thinking or feelings with people who you trusted proactively. In some research, self-disclosure is a kind of normal interaction in friendship. Do you find self-disclosure important in your secondary school friendship development? Was it a one-way or two-way interaction?

Jeff: It is very important to be two-way. Making friends is a two-way process. If it was only you talking about things, it wasn't a friendship. You could have just called to a phone-in radio show. It is important that this is a process of understanding oneself and helping others. Of course, I couldn't know all my friends in-depth, I tried to let them talk about what they wanted to say.

Lee: Was the two-way self-disclosure you mentioned about you venting all your feelings and ideas first, say in a scenario when you were unhappy, or did you expect to get something out of your friends? What did you want from your friends?

Jeff: When I talked about an incident, usually it was when there were some unresolved issues. I usually wanted to seek some opinions or some kind of inspiration, or maybe something that had been resolved... I didn't like just me talking, I wanted to see how other people looked at the same issue. I wouldn't just talk to one person but with different people so as to get different views, say I would tell them how that teacher behaved...they usually would supply me with different views that could inspire me to think about the issues and to make a choice on how to handle them.

Lee: From what you said about selecting a Head Prefect, you mentioned Yuen, the Head Prefect. This is also very interesting. Yuen, obviously was a top student, clearly proven by the exam results. I hope you don't mind, but you can refuse to answer, there was always comparison between you and Yuen. Academically, even before the DSE exams, people would predict how you and Yuen would perform in the DSE, and there was also comparison in selecting the Head Prefect. In such an atmosphere, when there were rankings and comparison on academic performance, leadership and other performance, how did you experience your student life?

Jeff: I feel at those moments I was very confused in S3 and S4, especially in the second term in S3. I questioned how different I was compared to other similarly gifted students. How come they made it, was it because of luck or something else? There was a period of feeling very confused. However, in the later stage in S5, I found that I had something stronger that other people didn't have. Say something Yuen didn't have but I did or vice versa that led to the outcome. I experienced this process. Yuen and I were really good friends. It was funny that my mother also asked why Yuen and I were not fierce competitors, but we shared a lot instead. I think we understood our own strengths and tried to help each other. I feel Yuen was an all-rounder and I was strong at certain things but weak in a few areas.

Lee: I agree. You may be exceptionally gifted in a few areas and Yuen was strong in all areas but not ultra-exceptional.

Jeff: This was what Yuen said although I don't agree 100%. This is an easier way to explain our differences.

Lee: How come it was the later stage of S5 when you had this understanding? Why S5?

Jeff: It was after being prefects for a while when I had tried... Specifically, on leadership, when we came onto the stage to speak publicly in the assemblies. I really got on the stage to observe the differences and how people felt when he was on the stage and when I was on the stage. I found that when we got onto the stage to perform similar duties, there were different outcomes. Through gradually experiencing all these, I found that there were different outcomes if a task was performed by me or him and it led to different outcomes, so I learned more about myself and understood him better.

Lee: You reckoned he was your friend, but he was not in your class. How would you describe the interaction you had with him from the time of working in the prefect team together to the mock exam in S6 to sitting the DSE and when the results were released? How would you describe your interaction with him? What sort of friends were you two?

Jeff: We were not the best friends of each other. But when we came across issues such as academic learning, or future career or meeting girls... we would talk about them, limited to these issues. I sometimes asked myself about my purpose of life, such as some existential questions. We might touch on these questions but I preferred talking about them with other friends.

Lee: But he was 't in the same class, not in the Orchestra and not in the Physics Olympiad, so when and where could you be with him?

Jeff: No, he was no longer in the Physics Olympics since S4, but we were in the Astronomers' Club. We weren't the most passionate members of the club but we knew a bit about Astronomy. We were therefore always together in the activities. We led some younger schoolmates and so we had to be together to discuss things. Apart from that, we sometimes also hung out together.

Lee: What do you mean? After school? Did you have lunch together?

Jeff: Yes, especially after DSE.

Lee: Why did you go out with him? Just two of you, or for some different reasons?

Jeff: I can't recall what happened after DSE but I remember dining out with him before I left Hong Kong.

Lee: You mean just two of you or a big group?

Jeff: Just two of us. When we went out, it was most likely reunions of the prefects. But we didn't get along with some of them, so we didn't want to invite them. It would usually only be me, Yuen and Gordon, although not very often.

Lee: As a high achiever, you excelled in some areas, far ahead of others. Chinese people have a saying that being invincible is lonely. Did loneliness happen to you in secondary school?

Jeff: The feeling of loneliness... it was most likely, I understood my level of ability and others were not at the same level, I had to step back and chose to stay on my own and not to be together with others. And I didn't feel lonely.

Lee: You sometimes chose to be alone, right? What did you do in those moments?

Jeff: Yes, I needed some time to be alone. Did you mean when I walked to the quiet corner of the room when I was surrounded by many people? Or when I chose to go home earlier and stayed away from others? They are a bit different.

Lee: Could be both. You mentioned in the classroom, when you felt you had heard what the teacher was teaching before, you had no choice but got stuck in the classroom. Some people might help the classmates sitting next to them or chat with them. In your case, you were stuck in the classroom and needed to find ways to manage being alone. What did you do?

Jeff: Do you mean about the reasons for choosing to be alone or what? I sometimes helped others in the lessons but sometimes if you asked me why I chose to take out a book to read by myself even if the teacher didn't allow it - it was more like, maybe it wasn't good, it was just about how I felt at that time. At that moment, if I wanted to help others, I helped them. But if I felt like doing things on my own, then I did so.

Lee: Were there moments you would choose to stay at home alone, not even physically being together?

Jeff: In a big crowd, yes... there were cases when I lied and pretended to be unwell, saying I was sick but actually I wasn't really ill.

Lee: Would it be related to your music talents? You were really good at music and it sometimes required solo practice. When you were at home, you have a brother, right? Did you stay alone a lot?

Jeff: I can't quite remember... as both of my parents worked and came home late, my brother did his own things. I didn't interfere with him and vice versa. We are very far apart as I am 6 years older than him. When I was in S6, in the year of DSE, he studied at a boarding school, so I was alone from Monday to Friday.

Lee: Did you enjoy being alone?

Jeff: Yes, for an appropriate amount...but I had to be alone most of the time.

Lee: So did you have more than an appropriate amount of time to be alone or did you get used to it and it became part of your life?

Jeff: I was used to it and learned to adjust. For example, when I was younger, when my brother wanted to go out but I wanted to stay at home, I chose to stay alone so that no one would disturb me.

Lee: Good. The last two questions. I would like to focus on stress management. No matter how strong you were, preparing for the DSE could be stressful, right? In the period before the DSE when you no longer took up ECA or school duties, when you only needed to live for the exams, did you feel under pressure? Would your stress be different from others' as you were a high achiever? How did you handle stress?

Jeff: There was certainly stress in the exam period. It was very stressful. The stress from school or parents was not as heavy as the pressure I put onto myself. For example, I tried to do the best. I applied for the best university. I tried to get into the best university. The pressure came from myself. How to de-stress...? I went running. I was in the volleyball team and I dropped out in S4 as I couldn't afford the time for training, 6 to 9 hours per month. But I went running by myself, usually three times a week. I went running by myself. I went back to studying after running.

Lee: Did your friends help you in this stressful period?

Jeff: ...Not too much impact from friends. I feel mainly it was like I faced the same issues as them. But in most cases, we just said: don't worry. There wasn't much impact from them.

Lee: Really the last question: many people mentioned teachers as significant people in their school life, do you agree?

Jeff: ...Teachers...I feel teachers had the strongest impact on my self-confidence. Of course, teachers had an impact on knowledge, they would give advice on what sorts of books to read or suggest doing certain tasks... but the most important thing was about reinforcement; when I did well, they praised me and made me do better. If we talk about the impact on friendship development, there wasn't much. I feel I didn't have the special chance to sit down to talk about how my friends were. They had many things to handle. It was only with some teachers who knew us better, when we had lunch together, they would ask about how I got along with my friends. For example... yes, say when I had a dispute with a friend, in S6, a teacher would suggest that maybe there was only a misunderstanding...

Lee: How come you only talked to this teacher specially?

Jeff: She was once our class teacher. We knew each other well so we had gatherings occasionally. She is not teaching in the school now.

Lee: Good. Very detailed. Do you have anything to add?

Jeff: Not for now.

Appendix 7

Coding on transcripts of second-round interviews

Lee: Let's talk about these friends, those you mentioned and also Tom. Some people say you make friends with those who are similar to you. Having some shared common backgrounds so as to communicate well. You mentioned Lee Chun On, Wong Kei Kwan and Tom. Were they really similar to you?

Ken: actually don't think I needed someone to be very similar to me to be my friend. I don't know if there were people around me who were really similar to me. There might not be one. I think everyone is unique. I don't know what it is meant by being similar, similar in personality? Or similar in hobbies? What does that mean? I like animals but not many people like animals. may have a more joyful personality or a bit more naïve. There might not be people like that around me. No, my friends were not similar to me.

Lee: You mentioned you like animals. Obviously I think Tom didn't like animals. Whatever kind of things that can move and that can change is a real challenge for him. So then how did you get along with him when you spent so much time with him? How did you accommodate your differences?

Ken: Maybe it is related to my personality. I heard a bit about the theory about introvert and extrovert. I feel I am an introvert. About animals, I was happy if I could discuss with others about animals. But for this hobby, I didn't need to have 5 or 10 friends to watch an animal together. We could not look at the same jar together. I would be very happy just staring at the jar alone. So my friendship with Tom wasn't based on this common ground. It could be about other areas of getting along.

Lee: What were the other areas?

Ken: Actually me and Tom didn't have any common hobbies at school. It was in senior forms we studied together, did chemistry, past papers together. He would ask me when he had a problem. There were really some questions he didn't know how to answer and he asked me, such as in Physics, and it happened I could think of the answer. But it was Tom helping me most of the time. Maybe this was what we had in common, nothing else.

Lee: This is related to my next theme. Some research are about the impact of loneliness. Many of them are about the negative impact of loneliness. There are two separate concepts: loneliness and aloneness. They might not be the same. What do you think?

Ken: Loneliness... Aloneness...

Lee: How would you interpret it?

Ken: Loneliness is more passive. One person wants to make friends with others but is afraid to take the first step and this leads to the situation of loneliness. Aloneness is an active choice. A person chooses to be alone for a reason, for having a rest or some reflection. I feel these two concepts that aloneness is neutral and loneliness is negative.

chuiifanlee@ou... Similarity

chuiifanlee@ou... Unique hobby

chuiifanlee@ou... Similarity

chuiifanlee@ou... personality

chuiifanlee@ou... aloneness

chuiifanlee@ou... Similarity

chuiifanlee@ou...

chuiifanlee@ou... Similarity

chuiifanlee@ou... Instrumental needs

chuiifanlee@ou... Similarity

chuiifanlee@ou... loneliness

chuiifanlee@ou... aloneness

chuiifanlee@ou... loneliness and aloneness

Appendix 8

Example of an individual report with the themes of individual participant: Chan

Chan excelled in all subjects throughout his secondary years. He was regarded as the top student of the year group and took up a number of leadership school posts such as senior prefect and chief editor of the school newspaper. He obtained outstanding HKDSE results.

Collaboration with friends

To Chan, collaboration with friends in school in academic and non-academic work afforded experiences that led to and consolidated his friendships with schoolmates. In academic collaboration, he enjoyed doing experiments and projects with his friends as these were opportunities for him to socialise and share academic ideas with like-minded friends with whom he shared similar academic goals. His everyday informal academic discussions with friends who were of similar academic ability with him similarly provided a platform for socialisation and interactions through having a common topic of academic discussion. These academically related engagements became the starting point for the development of friendships with his schoolmates with similar academic interests and abilities. In non-academic school engagements such as in the prefect board, he also found opportunities for socialisation with his schoolmates, e.g. when they performed their duties together, there were chances for them to socialise by having lunch together, and they became not just co-workers in the prefect board but friends in their off-duty time. Thus academic and non-academic collaboration opportunities were platforms for Chan to develop and consolidate friendships at school.

...The happiest...Organising prefect events together, conducting experiments for the Science Association on the Open Days together and we did some exam practice before the DSE exams and I was right and they were wrong...

...the friends I have now are mostly the people I worked with in organising activities or those who sat near me and had similar topics to talk about in the class. These became my friends more easily. At the beginning of getting along, we started with some work-related reasons. When we worked together, we had chances to exchange ideas and our topics of discussion expanded and we knew each other better...

...at first, we worked at some events such as swimming galas. After the events, we had lunch together and as we were in the same class and he had more friends, we had lunch together and had a chat. That was how it started. Then in S5, we became core members and we organised activities. So there were more chances to get together for discussions. We therefore had more topics to talk about...

...I liked asking other people for their opinions, for example on some difficult questions in physics, some harder ones. I liked asking them for their opinions. Even if they couldn't give me a complete explanation, I could be inspired by what they said. I liked exchanging ideas with them...

Academic collaboration - Positive competition - Self validation and growth

Through discussing academic topics with friends who were of similar abilities, he found that he could evaluate his own strengths and weaknesses. He liked sending challenging maths or science exam questions to his friends who also ranked top in the class academically. He enjoyed having academic debates with these friends. If he won in a debate, he gained confidence in his own ability. If he lost and was proven to be wrong, he took this experience as a chance for self-reflection and motivation to study harder so that he could win the next time. This shows that Chan's academic discussions and interactions with similarly high-achieving friends in school provided opportunities for self-validation and personal growth. He remarked that these debates were positive competition which in fact made him less

conscious about winning, losing or rankings because he felt that these competitors were his friends and they didn't feel hurt in the process of a fierce debate.

...Sometimes the questions were debatable. We didn't know whose explanation was right and whose was wrong. Before we found out the correct answer, we had a debate over it. Sometimes I was wrong and they were right and sometimes it was the reverse. When I was found right and they were wrong, I was happy...Because this made me feel I was smart...

...I was wrong many times and they were right. This proved that their thinking was superior to mine. This could be because I missed something or I was thinking in the wrong direction. Sometimes I was thinking in the wrong direction. This proved that I was not so good... I went home and thought about why I had got it wrong. I tried not to be wrong again...

...Being wrong at last wasn't the most important. It was a happy experience. If it were with people I didn't know very well, other people would feel uneasy. As I was always the one who got good academic results in school, if I debated with those who had poorer academic results or those I didn't know very well, they might feel that I thought they suck. That was why I didn't dare to discuss with these people. But with friends, even when their academic results were not the same as mine, they wouldn't mind. It was OK to be wrong. So what?

I feel they made me feel less concerned about rankings. On the contrary, I became more concerned about... I felt relaxed about positive competition. I do not mind being taken over...instead it was a way of boosting me to go forward.

I feel it was positive competition. Say in Chemistry, to be honest, those students who got the top results in Chemistry were in my class, they were all my friends, me, Tam and Jason. It was always we three who got the top marks. We always competed to get higher marks among us. We competed in tests and exams and we all got better results in the end.

Similarity and Dissimilarity

From the above accounts of collaboration with friends of similar ability, it seems that Chan preferred co-working with classmates who were similar to him and it was easier for him to develop friendships with these classmates due to their similarities and environmental proximity. Being well-known in the whole year group as a high achiever, he was well-aware of the stigma which could be attached to his high-achiever identity and the differences he could have with those who performed less well academically. Although he felt that he could have benefited from a more mixed and diverse classroom to develop interests other than academic pursuits, he felt more at ease when he socialised with classmates with similar academic interests and learning attitude. He felt he could have been affected negatively if he had studied in the same class with students who didn't focus on academic studies. He also had an empathetic awareness that students who performed less well academically might feel under pressure if they discussed academic topics with him. He said although he himself didn't mind engaging academically with all students, the weaker ones might be intimidated by his reputation and status in school and might feel that he was bragging.

...at first they should have shared topics of discussion with me academically. They were willing to join in my academic discussion. Secondly, our thinking and values should be in common. If we had different values, there would be unhappy experiences when having a discussion...

As I was always the one who got good academic results in school, if I debated with those who had poorer academic results or those I didn't know very well, they might feel that I thought they suck.

... as it wasn't about my own thinking but the classmates'. Some of them felt inferior to me. I could see that there were a lot of these classmates. They felt their academic results were far behind mine, so they didn't want to hang out with me. There were these schoolmates from primary to secondary schools. So we, ourselves, didn't have this feeling, we didn't mind...

(in a class of the same ability) the content of discussion will become monotonous. Usually academic students only think more or less the same thing, only about studying and they talk about studying. Having friends, one of the purposes, is to develop different interests and hobbies. If they only care about studying, how can they develop interests? But when you look at those schoolmates who were more active students, they had more diverse interests. They liked playing all sorts of things. In this sense, my exposure was rather narrow...

...when the whole class has a more academic-oriented atmosphere, there's some facilitating effect...the environment can facilitate you to stay focused on learning... If not, if there are some students who are not interested in learning, just wanting to fool around, you can't stop them. If many people were like that, I would not study well either.

He commented, however, that although his best friends were those who shared similar academic ability and interests, his friends were far more proactive than him in socialising. He was always the one who waited for his friends to initiate social activities. He found that his friends' proactive personality helped him to maintain his friendships with other schoolmates in school. His introverted personality was complemented by his best friends' proactive and outgoing personality but on the other hand created obstacles to his own friendship development and socialising skills.

(About similarities in personality) It had to be my opposite, especially Yuen. He was a very sociable person who liked inviting others to play ball games or have a meal. I was usually the one being invited. If my friends had the same personality as mine, being used to being invited, there would be very little chance to hang out with others. So Yuen was usually the more active one. He invited me more often and so we had more chances to chat... (but) these more active friends made me become more passive in making friends.

Apart from their personality differences, although Chan's friends seemed similar to him in terms of their school context and experiences, he was aware that everyone is unique. He recognised that his friends were different from him in their personal and school experiences, perspectives and problem-solving skills. In the two incidents he recalled when he was most troubled, that is breaking his shoulder before the mock exam and being disturbed by news reporters when his HKDSE results were released, he felt that his friends could not give him the needed comfort or suggestions on his problems as he believed that his unique experiences could not be understood by friends who had not gone through similar situations themselves. Being a high achiever could bring problems to him but he felt he couldn't talk about these with his friends easily. He therefore developed his own coping strategies either independently or by confiding in teachers as he felt that teachers, being in a different position, could inspire him to think of his own solutions to his problems.

*...when the DSE exam results were released, there were many news reporters who wanted to interview me. I wasn't happy at that time even though I got very good exam results... it was troublesome... I felt very bad about it. But at that time, I could not find my friends to talk about it. As many of my friends didn't do very well or their scores were at the borderline, I had no reason to talk about my problems with them. If I had said to them that I got 5** for 6 subjects...there were a lot of news reporters and I felt unhappy, of course no one would have given a damn about it. That's why I found teachers to talk to.*

... Talking to other people about it, as you could expect, most responses were would be like: "hope you get better! Be more careful! Have more rest!" ... It is hard for them to say something very inspiring and they are not you so they don't know how you feel. How could they say something about your feelings from your heart? Only I myself understand my own feelings. So I thought how to sort things out by myself...

Emotional independence

Although Chan described instrumental needs for friends such as having friends to play with, to discuss academic work or to work together with in school teams, he seemed to have a lower need for emotional support from his friends. As mentioned above, his awareness that his friends did not share the same mind as his and his self-sufficiency in decision making and problem solving made him develop emotional independence from others. He liked being alone as he could enjoy freedom. Although he liked his good friends sharing their personal feelings with him, he did not want to share too much of his own personal issues with others as he felt he didn't want to become a subject of others' analysis. This emotional independence arising from his confidence and ability to lead a self-sufficient life even when he faced problems led to his lower feeling of loneliness. He defined loneliness as a state of mind that would only occur when someone felt helpless as a result of feeling unable to solve his problems. As Chan seemed to have acquired confidence (he said he always knew the answers to his own questions), a mature mindset (he said that things would get better with time and if not, learning to improvise was another ability he needed to develop) and skills in handling his own issues (e.g. sitting in a different posture to reduce the pain to the shoulder, devising studying time to suit his healing process, etc.), he didn't have feelings of helplessness and loneliness while he was in secondary school.

About companionship, I didn't pay attention to it much. For example, some people might feel bad to have lunch alone, it looked boring, so they feel not having companionship. To me, I feel good instead. Being alone is good and I do not need to be accompanied by others most of time. Maybe other people need it but I don't need it most of the time. I know how to occupy myself...

I think loneliness is a question about feeling. It is not about having someone to be with you and you don't feel lonely. People feel lonely because of their own reasons. Maybe it was because of their thinking habit, making them have a feeling of helplessness towards life and the problems they face, feeling no one can help them... About being alone, to me, it is wonderful. One thing is no one will restrict me and I don't need to care about others.

...I feel if a person is too much involved in my personal issues, say about some solutions to my problems, those wouldn't be my friends, they could have been my family members or... I don't know who, I can't think of anyone like that at this moment. In everyday learning and life, those who chat and play with me are already good friends.

I liked figuring out other people's thinking, so when I told other people my ideas, they would try to figure out my thinking and I didn't like it.

I didn't expect other people could say something very inspiring... How could they say something about your feelings from your heart? Only I myself understand my own feelings. So I thought how to sort things out by myself.

INFORMATION SHEET



Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: The Significance of Friendship to Academic High Achievers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

Researcher name: Chui Fan LEE

Dear _____,

I am writing to invite you to take part in the above-named research project. Please consider the information below carefully and discuss it with family or friends if you wish, or ask me questions. You are absolutely free to decide whether you will participate in this research project or not. However, regardless of your decision, may I first of all express my gratitude for considering my invitation.

Brief summary of the project:

This research project is a dissertation required for the Doctor of Education programme at the University of Exeter. The project title is "The Significance of Friendship to Academic High Achievers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools". The focus of the project is to explore the importance of friends and friendship to students who have shown exceptional academic abilities.

Purpose of the research:

The emotional and social well-being of academically gifted students has been one of the less addressed topics among educators and policy makers. The purpose of this research is to explore how friendship influences academically gifted secondary school students in Hong Kong.

Why have I been approached?

For the project, the criterion for being considered as an academic higher achiever is set to candidates who scored approximately top 1% results at the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. You are invited to take part in this research project based on my knowledge of your performance in exams published in your secondary school's annual report or/and by means of personal contact with the teachers of your school or the students in the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine, the University of Hong Kong.

What would taking part involve?

There will be two to four interviews. The first interview is about 30 minutes to 1 hour long and, after a lapse of at least 1 week, the second (or the third and fourth interviews if needed) will be 20 to 40 minutes long. These interviews will be conducted during the period from May 2019 to September 2019 in person in Hong Kong or in the UK and/or via telephone or online conferencing. I will be the interviewer of all these interviews.

During the interviews, a digital audio-recorder/ a mobile phone with voice recording function will be used for recording. The interviews will be audio-recorded and will be transcribed into texts. The transcribed texts will be sent to you for comments. Data which may indicate your personal identities or that of other persons or schools involved will be omitted, made anonymous or pseudonymised.

At any point during the interviews or during all stages of this project, you have the right to withdraw from the project. You are encouraged to express your concerns explicitly and give suggestions on the conduct of the interviews and on other stages of the project. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions.

After the interviews, the data will be analysed and the first version of the written report of the findings is expected to be completed by May 2020. You will by then be informed of the report and you will be invited to read and give comments on it if you wish.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Through your recollection of your school life, you may benefit from having an opportunity to reflect on your own life journey and thus develop a better understanding of yourself and your relationships with society and other people. It is also a charitable contribution as your sharing may inform professional practice of front-line teachers in devising inclusive education programmes.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Although there are no obvious harms foreseen in this project, two issues may arise. Firstly, the interviews will take up your personal time. Secondly, the interviews may touch on some sensitive topics about you which might arouse uneasy feelings.

To mediate the issues stated above, the duration of the interviews and the time set for the interviews (e.g. not more than 60 minutes in the first interview) will be closely observed, unless you yourself request to extend the interview time. A convenient venue for the interview will be chosen based on your preference. You are free to withdraw from the project at any time you want and to answer the interview questions at your discretion. If the risk of creating uncomfortable feelings or stressful situations is foreseen, as the interviewer I have the obligation to suspend, end the interview, change the interview format or drop the interview question for your welfare. To safeguard confidentiality, no real names which can identify you, your school and other persons will be used. Data which may lead to identification will be omitted or altered.

For participants who are former students of the school where I teach, acceptance or refusal to participate in this project will have no effect on our former-teacher - former-student relationship or on any future duties related to these students I might undertake as a teacher of the school.

If persons such as other students or teachers whom I know are mentioned in the interviews, the information revealed by the interviewees will be kept confidential with no further consequences, and no further action will be taken by me on the matters mentioned.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You can stop taking part at any time without having to give a reason. Data collected can be destroyed in part or entirely at any time during the project if you request to withdraw from the study. A written confirmation of data having been destroyed will be given to you.

How will my information be kept confidential?

The University of Exeter processes personal data for the purposes of carrying out research in the public interest. The University will endeavour to be transparent about its processing of your personal data and this information sheet should provide a clear explanation of this. If you do have any queries about the University's processing of your personal data that cannot be resolved by the research team, further information may be obtained from the University's Data Protection Officer by e-mailing dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk or at www.exeter.ac.uk/dataprotection

Hard copies of notes, written records, consent forms and other documents, the audio device used will be kept in a locked cabinet and soft copies of the interview transcripts, written notes and translated versions of the interview transcripts will be stored in a personal computer and at the University U-drive with password protection and destroyed within 28 months from the date of the first interview, or as soon as possible. File names which do not indicate any personal data of the participants will be used for data filing and storage. The research findings will not be used for other research or by other researchers in future.

Will I receive any payment for taking part?

No financial inducements will be given for participating in this research project.

What will happen to the results of this study?

Professional sharing sessions will be organised during which I would share with fellow teachers in Hong Kong the important insights (but not the specific details of the project or the content of the dissertation) derived from this project. During such sharing sessions, confidentiality and personal privacy of all stakeholders involved in this project will be strictly observed.

Participants will also be informed by e-mail about the completion of the dissertation and are invited to read the report if they wish.

Who is organising and funding this study?

This project is self-funded. There are no commercial interests involved in this research project.

Who has reviewed this study?

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter (Reference Number....).

Further information and contact details

For further information and/or to take part, please contact me by email: cl609@exeter.ac.uk, by phone: 0085294175044 or by post: 120 Causeway Road, Hong Kong.

If you are not happy with any aspect of the project and wish to complain, please contact Dr Darren Moore, project supervisor by email at D.Moore@exeter.ac.uk or Gail Seymour, Research Ethics and Governance Manager: g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk, 01392 726621

Thank you for your interest in this project.



參加者資料說明

研究項目名稱:友誼對高學習成就的香港中學生的重要性

研究員姓名:利翠芬

_____ ,

本人現致函誠邀你參加上述研究項目。請你細心閱讀以下資料。如你認為有需要，可與你的家人或朋友討論，或向本人提問。你是絕對有自由決定會否參與這研究項目。無論你的決定如何，我亦先多謝你考慮我的邀請。

研究項目簡介:

這研究項目是The University of Exeter教育博士課程的論文部份。研究項目名為“友誼對高學習成就的香港中學生的重要性”。重點在於探索朋友及友誼對學術能力高的學生的重要性。

研究目的:

學術資優學生的情緒及社交發展及福祉是較少受教育工作者及決策者留意的題目。是次研究冀能探究友誼怎樣影響香港學術資優學生的成長。

為甚麼會聯絡我呢？

是次研究以在香港中學文憑試取得約首百份之一或以上成績的考生作介定為學習成就高的門檻。我是以你在所就讀的中學年報有關資料或本人認識的貴校老師或於香港大學李嘉誠醫學院就讀的學生來與你聯絡的。

參加這研究涉及甚麼程序及活動呢？

是次研究包括兩至四個於2019年5月至9月內以親身、電話或網上會議形式於英國或香港進行的訪問。首個訪問約30分鐘至1小時。於最少一星期後，將舉行第二訪問(如有需要，將舉行第三及四次)。本人為所有訪問的唯一訪問者。

訪問將以數碼錄音機或智能手機錄音，錄音將先以中文筆錄並交予受訪者作實及提供意見。任何有可能顯示你的個人身份及其他人士或學校的資料會被刪除或更改。

在訪問的任何時刻及該研究的任何階段，你也有權退出。我很歡迎你明確提出你的關注及就訪問的進行和其他研究階段提出意見，你也有自由拒絕回答任何問題。

訪問後，資料分析及書面報告第一稿冀於2020年5月完成。到時你將會被知會及歡迎你閱讀該報告並提供意見。

參加這研究會甚麼益處呢？

回想中學生活，你也許會反思你的人生、並反思自己及你和社會及其他人的關係。你慷慨的分享更可啟發前線老師制定合適的融合教育活動。

參加這研究會有甚麼害處或風險呢？

這研究不涉及明顯的風險，但也許訪問時間或訪問內容會對受訪者造成不便。就此，每次訪問都會於計劃時段內完成。參加者可選擇方便的地點受訪。你有自由在任何時間退出或決定會否回答問題。如在訪問過程中，受訪者看來可能會感到難受或不快，我有責任停止訪問或改變訪問形式。為保障個人私隱，可能顯示你身份的名稱、你的學校或其他人士的資料都會刪除或更改。

如參加者曾就讀於我任教的學校，參加是次研究與否，將不會對我倆舊老師/舊學生關係及日後有可能出現的校務工作造成影響。在訪問中若提及一些在我任教學校工作的人員或其他學生，有關內容會保密，我不會作任何和該事宜有關的跟進。

如我不想繼續參加這研究，會怎樣呢？

你可不用提供任何原因而停止參與這研究。有關你的資料，可應你的要求部份或全部消毀。資料消毀後將會以書面通知作實。

我的資料如何保密呢？

The University of Exeter 以保障個人及公眾利益的原則處理個人資料。大學致力提供具透明度的方法處理你的個人資料，此資料說明書冀能清楚交代有關詳情。如你有任何詢問而研究員不能解答的話，你可以電郵聯絡大學資料保障主任 (www.exeter.ac.uk/dataprotection)。

所有資料，如筆記、書面紀錄、同意書及錄音，將會妥善保存於上鎖文件櫃內或以加密存放於一部私人電腦及大學加密U-drive 並於由第一次訪問起儘快或28個月內消毀。所有檔案名稱均不包含可顯示個人身份的元素。是次研究內容將不會被其他研究員作其他研究用途。

我會得到報酬嗎？

是次研究不提供參加者任何報酬。

研究結果會有什麼用途呢？

研究結果的啟示(但不是個別資料)將會於香港教師專業分享會上發表。在分享會上，本人亦致力保障個人私隱。

誰計劃及資助這研究？

這研究全由本人計劃及資助,不牽涉任何商業利益。

誰人已核閱這研究計劃？

The University of Exeter 的研究道德委員會已核閱這研究計劃 (編號:)。

其他資料及聯絡方法

如有查詢，請以電郵cl609@exeter.ac.uk 或致電0085294175044 及郵寄香港高士威道120號與本人聯絡。

如你對這研究有任何不滿想作出投訴，請以電郵聯絡是次研究項目監督Dr Darren Moore (D.Moore@exeter.ac.uk)或研究道德監管主任Gail Seymour(g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk)。

多謝您對是次研究的關注。

利翠芬謹上

CONSENT FORM



Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: The Significance of Friendship to Academic High Achievers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

Name of Researcher: Chui Fan LEE

Please initial

box

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated..... (version no.....) for the above project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and to ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected.

☐

3. I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study may be looked at by members of the research team and individuals from the University of Exeter where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.

☐

4. I understand that taking part involves: anonymised interview transcripts being used for the purposes of this study and being kept in an archive for a period of up to 28 months;

reports published in an academic publication;

☐

teaching or training materials for use in teachers' professional development activities.

☐

I understand that taking part involves: anonymised interview audio recordings being used for the purposes of this study and being kept in an archive for a period of up to 28 months.

☐

I agree that my contact details can be kept securely and used by researcher Chui Fan LEE

☐

from the Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter to contact me.

Data Protection Notice- The information you provide will be used for research purposes and your personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation and the University's notification lodged at the Information Commissioner's Office. Your personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties. The results of the research will be published in anonymised form.

5. I agree to take part in the above project.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Name of researcher	Date	Signature

taking consent

When completed: 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher/project file



參加者編號:

同意書

研究項目名稱:友誼對高學習成就的香港中學生的重要性

研究員姓名:利翠芬

請在格內

簡簽

1. 我已閱讀有關這研究項目的資料說明書(註明日期: 第 版)。我有機會充份考慮資料內容及提問, 並獲得滿意的答覆。
2. 我明白我的參與是自願的, 我有自由無需交代原因地退出是次研究而我的合法權益不會受影響。
3. 我明白於研究中收集的資料將可能有The University of Exeter 的研究團成員或與是次研究有關的大學 人員閱覽, 我授權上述人士使用或閱覽與我有關的記錄。

4. 我明白我參與是次研究牽涉:

偽名化或匿名的受訪書面記錄將保存於檔案內最多28個月;

於學術刊物以報告形式發表

於教師專業發展活動作教授或培訓用途

我明白我參與是次研究牽涉:

偽名化或匿名的受訪錄音記錄將保存於檔案內最多28個月。

我同意由The University of Exeter教育系研究員利翠芬妥善保存我的聯絡資料作聯絡用途

。

The University of Exeter資料保障聲明:你提供的資料將用作研究用途。你的個人資料將以現行資料保障法例和本大學資料專員辦公室發出的指示處理。你的個人資料將以最嚴格的保密方法處理，不會在未授權下向第三者透露。研究結果會以偽名或匿名方法發表。

5. 我同意參加這研究項目。

☐

_____	_____	_____
參加者姓名	日期	簽署

_____	_____	_____
研究員姓名	日期	簽署

參加者及研究員各一份

Appendix 10: Ethics Approval Certificate



GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

St Luke's Campus
Hartree Road
Exeter UK EX1 2LU

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/>

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Title of Project: The significance of friendship to academic high achievers in Hong Kong secondary schools


Researcher(s) name: Chui Fan LEE

Supervisor(s): Dr Darren Moore, Dr Alison Black

This project has been approved for the period

From: 01/05/2019
To: 23/09/2021

Ethics Committee approval reference: D1819-041

Signature:  Date: 1/2/2019
(Professor Dongbo Zhang, Graduate School of Education Ethics Officer)

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