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"Just Challenge Those High-Ability Learners and They'll Be All Right!"

The Impact of Social Context and Challenging Instruction on the Affective Development of High-Ability Students

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"Just challenge those high-ability learners and they'll be all right!" seems to be a common belief among educators of the gifted. Despite the link between positive social and emotional development and the talent process, there is a paucity of research on the affective outcomes of schools that challenge gifted learners (Coleman, 2005). It has been theorized by many gifted education researchers that the specialized educational setting (e.g., a separate school or classroom) benefits academically advanced students

Summary

This study provided a voice to gifted elementary children attending three very different schools that endeavored to meet their atypical academic needs. Although educators have theorized that special programs for gifted students benefit gifted children academically and contribute positively to their social and emotional development, there is limited research to support this belief. The phenomenological framework used in this study allowed 27 gifted elementary students to present their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of extension class environments. The results demonstrate that while challenging instruction was clearly important for the emotional well-being of the advanced learners, it went hand in hand with the schools' approach to the social and emotional development of their student populations. The schools' objectives clearly influenced students' perceptions of emotional safety, acceptance of diversity, and teacher-student and peer relations in the schools. This finding differs from previous research results, which suggest that if a gifted child's cognitive abilities are catered to, his or her social and emotional needs will automatically be met. Whereas this study found that the social context of the school played an important role in the talent process, we also found a strong relationship between program type and socioaffective outcomes.

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affectively (Cross, Stewart, & Coleman, 2003; Gross, 2002). This occurs because they are removed from many of the stresses they come across daily in the traditional school environment, such as the need to change their language in order to be understood by peers (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Gross, 2002). Studies that have attempted to address the affective outcomes of these types of learning environments have predominantly focused on motivation or self-concept levels (Marsh & Hau, 2003; Plucker & Stocking, 2001). The impact that being challenged has on gifted learners' emotional well-being has generally not been researched (Cross, 2004). Conclusions on the affective experiences of gifted children in specialized environments have tended to be conducted with high school students and have concentrated on the outsider's, rather than the insider's, perspective (Coleman, 2005; Cross et al., 2003). The voices of gifted elementary students in this type of learning environment have therefore remained relatively unheard.

Challenging Instruction

Researchers have suggested that many gifted students do not have their learning needs met in the typical classroom and rarely experience academic challenge, which does not bode well for their involvement in the academic talent development process (Archambault et al., 1993; Gross, 2004). Years of academic neglect may not only impinge on talent development, but may also impact the social and emotional development of the gifted child. According to Cross (2004), the most frequent reason that gifted students were sent for testing at the psychological clinic at Ball State University was a negative change in their behaviors at school. Cross hypothesized that behavioral changes were due largely to the gifted children's frustration at being continually forced to adhere to a curriculum well below their developmental levels.

Other affective outcomes such as gifted children's feelings of self-worth have also been found to be negatively impacted by lack of challenge (Dweck, 1999). Teachers may unwittingly diminish gifted children's self-worth by praising them for work

into which they have not put much effort. Unfortunately, an unchallenging curriculum can not only damage gifted children's self-worth, but also encourage them to seek the easy path and work well below their true potential (Siegle & McCoach, 2001; Winebrenner, 2001). Rogers described a very bright young boy in second grade (IQ > 200) who had asked his parents to put him back into first grade because he was "failing school". When asked why he thought he was failing, he replied, "Well if I was smart enough the teacher would give me something new and hard to do and that never happens" (K. B. Rogers, personal communication, July 2009). Another negative consequence of gifted children being given an unchallenging curriculum may be their failure to develop important study and note-taking skills (Siegle & McCoach, 2001). This can unfavorably impact self-efficacy when they finally do face academic challenge in high school or university (Gross, 2004; Reis, 2003). This was found to be the case in Reis' (2003) study of gifted underachieving high school students, who believed that if they had been challenged in elementary school, they would have learned self-management skills that would have assisted them to cope better with the academic rigors of high school. Several researchers have hypothesized that these negative outcomes could be avoided if the gifted child were placed in a specialized school that purposefully caters to his or her unique academic needs (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Gross, 2004; Rogers, 2002). Indeed, Coleman's (2005) research at a gifted state residential high school in the United States described a unique social environment, in which diversity was accepted and students felt safe enough to demonstrate their ability and test new academic horizons.

There are some researchers and educators in the field, however, who question the benefits of educating the gifted child in the specialized educational environment (Craven & Marsh, 1997; Craven, Marsh, & Print, 2000). Much of their argument concerning appropriate educational settings for gifted children centers on some students' academic self-concept, which has been shown in several studies to drop when they are moved from a mixed-ability school setting to a specialized school with peers of higher ability (Craven

et al., 2000; Marsh & Hau, 2003). These researchers have perceived this drop in academic self-concept as potentially damaging to the academic development of gifted children (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995). Others have argued that it provides them with a more realistic perception of their level of academic ability (Adam-Byers, Squiller Whitsell, & Moon, 2004; Gross, 2004). This more realistic appraisal of their academic ability may better prepare gifted students for the competitive world of higher education (Gross, 2004; McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rogers, 2005, 2007). Indeed, Adam-Byers and colleagues (2004) perceived that the ease with which gifted students achieve top ranking in mixed-ability school settings puts them at risk of becoming grade-orientated and repeating work already known, rather than being motivated to learn new things for learning's sake.

The intent of this research, then, was to go to the students themselves and develop an insider perspective of how gifted students at the elementary level in specialized programs experienced academic challenge during their school day. Through the participants' in-depth descriptions, the authors hoped to understand how both the social context and the specialized school programs impacted the gifted students' affective development. Social and emotional outcomes were investigated in three very different school settings so that a better understanding of the creation and role of social context could be achieved, all of which have been shown to impact the talent development process (Coleman, 2005; Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2007). The research questions that guided this study follow.

1. How do elementary aged gifted students experience the social contexts of schools that actively cater to their advanced intellectual needs?
2. What differences exist in the way gifted girls and boys experience the social context of schools that provide them with classes that provide them with academic extension?
3. What are the affective outcomes for these types of school environment and how do they relate to gifted children's experiences of being gifted in a school that actively caters to their academic needs?

Method

Participants

Following the phenomenological tradition, participants were selected who had experienced the phenomenon being researched (i.e., attending schools where specific provisions had been made to purposefully cater to their academically gifted student population) and who were willing to describe it in a tape-recorded interview (Bryman, 2001; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, 27 academically advanced students who had experienced school settings that actively catered to their atypical academic needs participated. Nine students (5 girls and 4 boys) were selected from a coeducational school (Westwood School), and 9 students participated from each of two single gender schools, one catering to girls (St. Mary's School) and one catering to boys (Brandon School). The student participants were from grades 4, 5, and 6 and between 10 and 12 years of age. All participants' and schools' names have been changed, with participants selecting their own pseudonyms.

Settings

The participants came from schools in the metropolitan area of Sydney, Australia. St. Mary's School was a private school for girls with more than 900 students. The school offered a wide range of facilities such as tennis courts, a swimming pool, computer rooms, two libraries, and a recording, drama, and dance studio. Brandon School, like St. Mary's, was a single-gender school with a long educational history in Australia. The school also had many modern-day facilities. Most of these facilities, however, were sports oriented, offering rugby, soccer, swimming, water polo, volleyball, basketball, athletics, cricket, cross country, rowing, and fencing. It had the largest school population of the three schools involved in this study, with 1,500 boys attending the school. Westwood School differed from St. Mary's School and Brandon School in that it was a coeducational school. It also had a much shorter educational history and smaller student

Table 1

Extension Class Entrance Requirement and Grouping Options

School	Entrance	Grouping Options
Brandon School: Single-sex school for boys	IQ 140	Weekly pull-out program, projects, subject acceleration (very rarely used)
St Mary's School: Single-sex school for girls	Multiple criteria	Whole-grade acceleration, daily flexible cross-graded math classes, flexible pull-out group, subject enrichment
Westwood School: Coeducational	Multiple criteria	Whole-grade and subject acceleration and full-time ability grouping

population with 700 students. Details of each school are provided in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed individually on two occasions in their school environments. The phenomenological interview method was followed, which meant that the interviews were informal and unhurried with each lasting approximately 45 to 50 minutes. Open-ended questions were devised to guide the interview; the opening question was, "Can you describe for me what it is like to attend (name of school) from the minute you arrive until the time you leave?" If the child did not speak extensively about his or her "everyday world," follow-up questions were introduced, such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" or, "Can you recall another time that happened and describe it to me?" A series of observations were also carried out on the playground and in the classroom in order to further understand the participants' everyday worlds in the school environment. Member checking, another procedure not advocated by the transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), but followed by Giorgi

(1985), a psychological phenomenologist, was also incorporated into this study to ensure its validity.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by adhering to specific steps adapted from Moustakas' (1994) interpretation of phenomenological analysis. The initial step was to read each interview three to four times and mark off statements that were relevant to the research questions (Merriam, 2002).

These important statements (meaning units) were recorded, and then clustered into themes for each participant (Giorgi, 1999). These themes were then used to create textural and structural descriptions, which reflected each participant's personal experience of the phenomena researched. Composite thematic units were then collected and charted for each school (Merriam, 2002). Themes were tallied and organized in order of importance to participants for each school. These were used to create Composite Textural and Structural descriptions for each school. Common themes across schools were then tallied. Three broad themes emerged from these results, which were, in order of salience to the participants, *Peer Relations*, *Challenging Instruction*, and *Power*. Several subthemes also emerged in this study, including the themes of *Gender*, *Change*, and *Competition*.

This study concentrates on the theme of Challenging Instruction, as the issue of grouping gifted students for the effective delivery of an extended curriculum has long been a contentious issue in gifted education research (Coleman & Cross, 2005; Craven & Marsh, 1997; Craven et al., 2000; Gross, 2004; Rogers, 2002). A review of the literature, however, demonstrated that elementary aged gifted students have rarely been asked to give a first-hand account of their personal experiences of challenge in the three different types of educational environments investigated in this study. It is intended that providing an insider view of the gifted students' experiences of academic challenge, and the resultant social and emotional outcomes, will allow educators to achieve a better understanding about what these types of

programs provide. Crossover results with the other themes as well as the results of the entire study are presented in the discussion section of this manuscript.

Results

Theme: Challenging Instruction

St. Mary's School and Westwood School placed strong emphasis on both the academic and social emotional development of their students. These participants perceived that they could expect daily challenge and that their school had set procedures to deal with any type of social and emotional difficulty that might arise. These comprehensive programs appeared to have played an important role in the creation of mainly positive social contexts at these schools.

Both the Westwood School and St. Mary's School participants described schoolwide formal social and emotional development programs that taught students a variety of social strategies. Participants believed that these programs promoted the acceptance of diversity and countered aggressive behavior on the playground. The Brandon School participants' perceptions of their school's social and emotional support system contrasted sharply to those described by the Westwood School and St. Mary's School participants; they generally believed that they were expected to face social and emotional difficulties on their own. These participants also generally perceived that the social context of their school was unaccepting of difference. For example, 7 of the 9 participants perceived that they were different than their peers and generally believed that being academically gifted at Brandon School was socially stigmatizing.

Participants at Westwood School stood out as being the most positive in their descriptions of their school day. These students, unlike their Brandon School and St. Mary's School counterparts, were offered an extended curriculum and were grouped with like-ability peers for the majority of their school day. These

participants were united in their belief that they had grown academically since their placement in the opportunity classroom (OC) and none of them wished to return to the mixed-ability classroom. Ely described this perception as follows:

> Before I wasn't challenged, so I kept on thinking, you know what? This is easy, so I don't have to use my brain, so I sort of didn't use it much and it in a sense it got dusty 'cause I wasn't used to using it. My brain wasn't accessed and now I come here and it's so vibrant, you're always learning new things and you're always understanding more because your brain's been functioning more here, they really apply your needs. (personal interview, June, 12, 2007)

Six out of the 9 Westwood School participants believed that the daily academic challenge had increased their levels of motivation and general interest in learning. Jake believed a more challenging curriculum had increased his level of motivation, "Because there's a lot of hard work and I'm a lot more interested, cause we're doing stuff that I really like. So I'll go and look at it outside of school" (personal interview, August 18, 2007). Previous research has found that when students are interested and engaged in their schoolwork they are more successful in mastering and retaining their learning (Hancock & Betts, 2002). Seven participants also described how their teachers' beliefs that they could achieve the high goals set for them led them to move forward and accomplish tasks that they had previously believed too difficult to achieve:

> I'm really happy that I took the offer, like my book work is so much better and we do really hard stuff, like our teacher said she would give us Grade 10 work, which I didn't believe it, but we see it in our books. Last year we did work that the whole of Grade 4 did, this year we're doing grades higher than us. (personal interview, June 12, 2007)

All 9 of the Westwood School participants believed that the opportunity to work with like-ability peers had increased their academic growth. Alana in Grade 6 perceived, "You're working with a lot of people that are very good at different things so you learn a lot from other people which is really good" (personal interview, August 18, 2007). Participants believed that the opportunity to work collaboratively together had not only impacted their academic growth, but had also encouraged a sense of community in the classroom. Karkanses in Grade 6 described the supportive class environment as follows: "It is like a family . . . we do most things together. And we all know each other and we are like a team" (personal interview, June 12, 2007).

Seven of the 9 St. Mary's School participants described their school extension program to be challenging and allowed them to work at their own pace. For example, Alessandra described the work she received in the extension program as follows: "A fun type of challenge. Not at my level like, 'oh I can do this,' it doesn't just mean you can do everything it just means you learn" (personal interview, 19 August, 2007). Eight of the St Mary's School participants described the math pathways program (regrouping program) positively, perceiving that it effectively catered to everyone's academic needs. Susannah in Grade 6 stated

> It is really good, because it's for everyone. Like, say you are very good at number patterns you might move up for that, but then you might move down for fractions. So you will move up and down quite regularly. (personal interview, June 10, 2007)

These participants also described supportive relationships with their teachers, with 7 of the participants perceiving that they could rely on their teachers for emotional support. Six of these participants additionally believed that teachers went out of their way to encourage collaboration and student autonomy in the classroom. For example, Anna in Grade 6 described how her teacher had positively impacted teacher-student relations by involving them in classroom decision making:

> Our teacher puts a lot of things in trust. Like, I trust you to make the right decision. Like, when we got our tables, she said you can just choose where you're going to sit, and she was happy because we didn't just choose our best friend. (personal interview, August 19, 2007)

Eight of the 9 St. Mary's School participants were not as positive in the descriptions of the time they spent in the mixed-ability classroom. Although these participants were offered extension work in some of their classes, it was not differentiated and was voluntary. Calypso who was in Grade 5 described her nonextension English class as follows, "It's just like copying work from the Smartboard. I mean its sooo boring; I mean it's not beneficial in any way. Something is on the board, write it in your book" (personal interview, August 19, 2007). The experience of lack of challenge and the opportunity to work with like-ability peers in the mixed-ability classroom seems to have impacted negatively on the St. Mary's School participants' attitude to school, with half of the participants looking forward to coming to school and the other half looking forward to certain days more than others. This finding resonates with previous research that found gifted students are unlikely to have their academic needs met in the regular classroom (Rogers, 2007; Winebrenner, 2001).

Brandon School participants held the most negative attitude to their school day. These participants described an extension system that was inflexible and one that was not consistently applied throughout the elementary school. For example, only participants with an IQ in the highly gifted range could be included in the extension program, and classroom teachers differed on their rulings on whether extension work could replace class work. Brandon School participants also believed that the social context of their school did not support difference and that challenging instruction was generally only experienced in the weekly pull-out program.

Participants at Brandon School described teachers as following a conservative approach to teaching. These participants generally described classrooms where students were expected to work in silence, on the same work at a lock-step pace. Xiau in Grade

5, for example, believed that students were punished for going ahead with their work and described how this had happened to him in physical and health education:

> I didn't think it was that fair, seeing as we had done it so many times and we knew how to get there. So if we had taken it in the first week and knew how to do it, I think it's fair that we go on ahead and start doing our work. (personal interview, June 6, 2007)

Although time spent in the mixed-ability classroom was frustrating and stressful for many of the Brandon School participants, the majority looked forward to the weekly challenging activities offered in the pull-out program. David in Grade 6 described the benefits of attending the extension program as follows, "I get to go at my own pace with it. I just like having more independent things. We get to choose what we want to do and have like more flexible time" (personal interview, June 6, 2007). Some of the participants perceived that the extension classes also helped advanced learners "improve and excel in their strengths" (personal interview, June 6, 2007).

Although the three schools in this study seemed to have different strengths in the creation of their individual social contexts, the participants' descriptions indicated that participants valued the following outcomes. First, participants felt that a formal school social and emotional support system was necessary as they perceived that it impacted both teacher-student and student-peer relations, as well as their feelings of security in the school environment. Second, all participants valued the time they spent in the extension classroom and described how a challenging curriculum and the opportunity to work at their own pace had impacted their motivational levels and perceptions of self. Third, participants appreciated the opportunity to work collaboratively with like-ability peers in the extension classes, as they believed it positively impacted their academic growth and social relationships.

Subtheme: Gender. Male and female participants generally held differing perceptions of the social contexts of their schools.

In the theme of Challenging Instruction the main difference between the genders lay in their perceptions of school-induced stressors. This may have been influenced to a large degree by societal and parental beliefs as well as the gender contexts of their schools.

While all of the female participants enjoyed the opportunity to engage in challenging instruction, they were generally united in their perception of school-induced stressors. Lack of time to complete academic tasks such as homework, as well as the high expectations of others, were described as stressful by 6 of the female participants at Westwood School and St. Mary's School. Susannah in Grade 6 described how lack of time to complete homework negatively impacted her in the following quote:

> I am usually really, really tired in the morning because of the amount of homework we get the night before . . . when I get home I would have to go straight to homework and as soon as I would finish I would have no time for anything, but eat my dinner and go to bed, no downtime. So sometimes I am kind of afraid to come home. (personal interview, August 19, 2007)

The number of extracurricular activities undertaken by the female participants may have contributed to this negative outcome, as their list of extracurricular activities usually outnumbered that of their male counterparts. Female participants were also found to be more adversely impacted by the high expectations of others than their male counterparts. Four out of the 5 Westwood School female participants and 5 out of the 9 St. Mary's School participants found the high expectations of teachers, peers, and, in some cases, parents stressful. For example, Alana in Grade 6 described how both peers and teachers held high expectations of OC students not only academically but socially as well, "It's kind of like you know you're the OC class and just because you're smart then you have to be really good at everything else, that's why you have to be a really nice person" (personal interview, June 12, 2007).

Although the female participants at St. Mary's School and Westwood School were united in their perception of lack of time and the high expectations of important others as sources of stress, the Westwood School participants held more negative perceptions on ranking and class competition. Three out of the 5 Westwood School female participants perceived that the OC classroom was more academically competitive than the mixed-ability classroom. Julie in Grade 5 described this experience as follows: "There is a lot of competition in the class; it used to be like a friendly say soccer match, but now it's like the real thing" (personal interview August 18, 2007). Karkanses, a member of the Westwood School Grade 6 OC class, described her social coping strategy for hiding poor results as follows: "When they ask me what my mark was and they didn't know what it was and it wasn't very high, I say I can't remember exactly, but it was about 98%" (personal interview, June 12, 2007). Both Alana and Karkanses, who shared the same classroom, perceived that grade visibility encouraged class competition. Alana described this process as follows:

> Lots of the time like our teacher will put up on the board what our mark is and you don't want to come to class anymore, because if you get a bad mark you feel humiliated that you have got this mark when you have got all your peers looking at what you have got. You think like if we didn't have them up then we wouldn't be so fussed about whether you got a really good mark or not. (personal interview, June 12, 2007)

The female participants at St. Mary's School generally described classroom competition in far more positive terms than their counterparts at Westwood School. This may have been due to the flexible nature of their extension program and the fact that these participants spent the majority of their day in the mixed-ability classroom, so would not have felt as threatened about losing their academic standing.

Eight of the 9 Brandon School participants concurred with the St. Mary's School participants in perceiving that they were not negatively impacted by ranking or classroom competition. This may have had more to do with the gender culture of their school and an unchallenging curriculum, however, than a supportive school environment. For example, whereas participants did not describe the classroom in competitive terms, they were united in their belief that sports games on the playground were "really competitive and also on some occasions violent because everyone wanted to win at sport" (personal interview, June 6, 2007). Although academic accolades were not described as being desirable by any of the Brandon School participants, entrance into preferred sports teams such as the rugby or cricket team was highly desired, as it impacted social standing on the playground. This finding correlates with previous gender research (Clark, 2002; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Swain, 2005). The esteemed position athletic boys held on the Brandon School playground seemed to be reinforced by the school, with athletic trophies and plaques far outnumbering the academic ones in the school hall. Two of the participants who represented the school in elite sports teams perceived that their privileged position came at a price, as peers expected them to consistently perform at a very high level athletically.

The high value placed upon sporting ability by Brandon School seems to have led to only one type of male identity being accepted by students. Several of the participants therefore advised that athletic ability be demonstrated before academic acumen in order to gain social acceptance on the playground. Shugilu in Grade 5 gave the following advice to new boys, "Try and avoid being too smart and to play lots of games with the other guys from the beginning" (personal interview, 1 August, 2007).

The male participants at Westwood School, on the other hand, described how different types of male identities were accepted on their playground. All 6 of these participants perceived that boys did not necessarily have to exhibit athletic ability to gain peer acceptance. Both the female and male participants at Westwood School were united in their perception that play-

ground groups were open to all students with no one group dominating another. Sam in Grade 5 described the unusual social context of Westwood School as follows: "Everybody is friends pretty much in the grade, unlike my old school where you were either like the sporty people they were one group and then there was the not so sporty people that were another group of friends" (personal interview, June 12, 2007). This finding may have been due to Westwood School not being perceived as a school that was dominated by a social landscape that prized sports above all else, as the school had a strong intellectual and cultural focus. The school's social and emotional program was also perceived by all 9 of the participants to encourage the acceptance of difference and to foster a sense of community at Westwood School.

The Westwood School male participants were also aligned with their female peers in that they perceived that they were no longer assured of a top academic position in the OC classroom. Their outlook differed to their female counterparts, however, in that they believed that their placement in the opportunity class assured them that they were still academically ahead of the majority of their same-aged peers. Jake in Grade 6 described this perception as follows: "It's a lot harder to top the class cause you get some really, really smart people in it; knowing that I'm in the top 13 of the grade, cause the OC is 13 people, makes me feel really good" (personal interview, June 12, 2007).

Unlike many of the female participants, none of the male participants at Westwood School perceived the OC classroom to be a competitive learning environment. Instead, some of the boys found that their drop from first place motivated them to work harder to gain back their preferred position.

While 3 of the male participants at Westwood School, like their female counterparts, perceived that peers and teachers held high academic expectations of them, they generally believed that they could meet them and were in some cases motivated by these expectations. In fact, 2 of the male participants at Westwood School perceived that peer expectations in the OC classroom were less stressful than in the mixed-ability classroom, as they no longer were consistently expected to achieve the top score.

David in Grade 5 described this perception as follows: "It's good to know I am not one of the only smart people in the class like sometimes if you don't get a good mark in a test" (personal interview, August, 1, 2007).

Although academic extension provision was an important variable in the creation of positive social and emotional outcomes, it was experienced differently by the participants at the three schools due to the disparate types of extension programs and gender cultures of the three schools. The male participants' different perceptions on masculine identity seem to have impacted their perception of acceptance within the social contexts of their school environments and therefore the need to hide their ability or to demonstrate their academic acumen. Although several of the female participants described as stressful the high academic expectations of important others, ranking, and lack of time to complete academic tasks, none of these participants wished to replace the type of instruction they were receiving in the extension program with the instruction they had experienced previously in the mixed-ability classroom.

Discussion

The findings of this study may have implications for the organization of gifted programs in that the perception of academic challenge and positive social context were found to be intricately linked to the type of program offered by the school. Although the experience of academic challenge seemed to be associated with the type of extension program operating in the school, the social contexts of the three schools appeared to impact the participants' enjoyment of school, experience of competition, motivation levels, willingness to learn, stress levels, and grade orientation. Additionally, school gender expectations played a key role in the participants' perceptions of what made children popular or how they should behave on the playground.

Although the findings regarding the high expectations of others, shortage of time to complete tasks, and loss of ranking

are consistent with previous research on opportunity class environments, the disparity between the female and male participants' experiences on these issues has not been generally noted in prior research at the elementary school level (Adam-Byers et al., 2004; Swiatek, 2002). The female participants in this study may have experienced more stressors in the school environment due to internalized cultural beliefs and societal expectations. For example, gender research has found that females may be socialized to underestimate their abilities and therefore tend to be more concerned about whether their grades and ranking demonstrated that they are capable of coping with the advanced academic program offered in the opportunity classroom (Kerr & Foley Nicpon, 2003). Females have also been found to be more concerned than males about conforming to group expectations and therefore tend not to want to perform below or above the class average (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Silverman, 2000).

Schools that purposefully worked toward meeting the affective needs of their students by introducing several different types of social and emotional support systems were arguably far more effective in creating a positive social context. Academically advanced students at these schools appeared also more likely to be able to demonstrate their academic ability without resorting to maladaptive types of social coping strategies. Peer relations at these schools were not only more accepting of diversity, but more empathetic as well. This finding seems to have been the result of both the formal teaching of social strategies as well as the formation of programs that purposefully encouraged grade interaction. Grade interaction through programs such as lunch time clubs seems to have fostered a sense of community in the schools.

The acceptance of diversity amongst the school population was further encouraged by the schools' celebration of student achievement in a variety of areas such as the creative arts, sporting arena, and outside academic competitions.

A sense of autonomy, or the lack of it, in school environments was also seen as crucial to the development of positive social context, as it involved participants' perceptions of academic choice,

Table 2

Recommendations to Promote Positive Social Context in the School Environment

Gender differences	Teacher education in the affective development of gifted males and females. Committees to address the different ways the genders may experience extension classes and to encourage the adoption of more than one type of gender identity
Affective support	Formal social and emotional structures to develop a sense of community in the school Teachers who model and educate social skills and emotional coping strategies to students.
Academic development	The provision of a differentiated program that allows students to work at their preferred pace and ability level. The opportunity for students to work collaboratively daily with like-ability peers. The encouragement of self-efficacy by allowing students to have some control over their learning and school day. Teacher sets high, attainable academic goals.

which in turn impacted their motivational levels and perceptions of self-management.

The findings of this study suggested that schools that want to create optimal social contexts should ensure that they have considered these outcomes carefully, as they were strongly associated with positive social context by the participants in this study. Recommendations for the creation of optimal social context are listed in Table 2.

Conclusion

This study set out to discover students' perceptions of extension class environments. Although the offer of daily challenge is an important variable in the gifted child's perceptions of a

positive school environment, it is intricately linked to the social context of the school.

This study's findings demonstrate that just like the cognitive outcomes, the social coping strategies and affective outcomes seemed to be strongly linked to program type. For example, social coping strategies, attitudes to class competition, and peer relations were all seen to be impacted by type of gifted program in this study. Gifted girls and boys were also found to react differently to the type of extension program provided by the schools as well as to engage in different types of social coping strategies. Further research may help to confirm or reject this potential relationship.

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