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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study sought the voice of eight adolescents attending two academically selective high schools in New South Wales to better understand how peer groups influence the social and emotional wellbeing of ability grouped students. The 21-item Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to measure participants' self-reported psychological wellbeing. Individual semi-structured interviews explored the factors that contributed to the formation and maintenance of secure peer relationships, and a school's role in this. Transcripts were interrogated utilising iterative principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1995). The findings from this study suggest that secure peer groups have a positive influence on the social and emotional outcomes of students who attend academically selective high schools. The formation and maintenance of school-based friendship groups, however, is hindered by several logistical constraints outside the control of the individual students.

## **Keywords**

peer group, social, emotional, selective high school, student wellbeing, qualitative research



## **The role of secure peer groups in social and emotional outcomes for adolescents in an academically selective high school setting**

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This qualitative study sought the voice of eight adolescents attending two academically selective high schools in New South Wales to better understand how peer groups influence the social and emotional wellbeing of ability grouped students. The 21-item Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to measure participants' self-reported psychological wellbeing. Individual semi-structured interviews explored the factors that contributed to the formation and maintenance of secure peer relationships, and a school's role in this. Transcripts were interrogated utilising iterative principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1995). The findings from this study suggest that secure peer groups have a positive influence on the social and emotional outcomes of students who attend academically selective high schools. The formation and maintenance of school-based friendship groups, however, is hindered by several logistical constraints outside the control of the individual students.

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### **Introduction**

The release of the *Wellbeing Framework for Schools* (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015), asserts the need to actively plan for and manage students' cognitive, emotional, social, physical and spiritual wellbeing. The provision of gifted and talented programs via academically selective high schools – schools that select their cohort based on high academic results from a specific entry exam – is one way the domain of cognitive wellbeing is addressed by the DoE. However, the reflections of the researcher's own professional experience and that of her colleagues indicate that, for a proportion of students attending academically selective high schools, the provision of social and emotional wellbeing supports may need review. In particular, this view came about through working with students with indicators of negative affect who reported that they did not belong to a secure school-based peer group. Yet it was unclear how, beyond attachment theory, peer groups in an academically selective high school setting contributed to individual wellbeing and, further, what role schools and their systems played in facilitating friendships amongst their cohort.



## **Literature Review**

### ***Social Support***

Erikson's psychosocial theory of development proposes that between the ages of 6 and 12 children start to compare themselves to their peers. Further, during adolescence, young people are actively engaging in the establishment of their varying identities, such as familial, social and occupation roles, with the help of the peers immediately accessible to them (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2015). Given the amount of time students spend at school, it is reasonable to assume that school-based friends and peer groups will have a significant impact on the development of a young person's identity and their resultant psychological wellbeing. Indeed, peer influence has been directly linked with the social and emotional adjustment of children. Moreover, most academically successful students tend to engage actively and prosocially with their peers (Wang & Neihart, 2015).

The mere perception of social support, in fact, appears to influence adolescents' ability to cope with daily stressors (Printz, Shermis & Webb, 1999) and suggests that those individuals who feel they have a secure peer group are more likely to have lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress as compared to those who rate the strength of their group as weaker. Similarly, Boulard et al. (2012) found peer relationships to be a predictor of depressive mood and concluded weak social relationships in the school context to be a prominent determinant of depressive mood in adolescents. In addition, the strength of attachment formation has been associated with pathways to anxiety in later life (Brumariu & Kerns, 2013). One school of thought suggests that loneliness brought about by social isolation is a significant intervening variable in both clinical and non-clinical individuals, whereby anxiety leads to depression (Ebesutani et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important for schools to support the development of student mental wellbeing by actively facilitating prosocial interactions. However, it has been posited that academically gifted students have social needs different to their neurotypical peers (Siegle, 2015).

### ***Differing Social and Emotional Needs of the Gifted and Talented***

Some studies suggest that gifted and talented students are better equipped than neurotypical peers to cope with and adjust to daily stressors, including negotiating social situations (Preuss & Dubow, 2004). This is believed to be attributed to these students being more likely to use cognitive-based problem solving strategies to cope with challenges, rather than the emotion-driven action-oriented strategies favoured by typical children. Conversely, a more common theme throughout the literature is that gifted and talented students are likely to deny their giftedness when with average-achieving peers. Indeed, some gifted and talented students who experienced social isolation were aware of the social cost of their cognitive abilities and tended to moderate their abilities in the classroom (Barber & Mueller, 2011; Reis & Renzulli, 2004).

The notion of 'the stigma of giftedness', first posited by Coleman (Barber & Wasson, 2015), asserts that academically high-achieving students feel different to their normal-achieving peers and will downplay their cognitive abilities to gain perceived social acceptance among typical peers. Swiatek (2001) replicated similar



findings within a mainstream school setting, however, showed that denial of one's giftedness negatively correlated with self-concept scores. It has been argued that, in the longer term, the dichotomy between the gifted individual's cognitive and social/emotional development when with typically developing children may, in fact, lead to social isolation and an increased risk of depression and associated concerns (Neihart, 2007). Possibly contributing further is the increased capacity of some academically gifted students to mask negative thoughts and feelings from peers and adults as a means of protecting others, thereby decreasing opportunities for early detection and intervention (Jackson & Peterson, 2003). Thus, it would appear that high-achieving students within a mainstream setting who conform to the values of normal achieving students, sacrifice something of themselves in the process (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012), raising the question of appropriate grouping for academically high-achieving students.

### ***Academic Adjustments for the Gifted and Talented Student***

Common curriculum adjustments made for gifted and talented students in NSW government schools include subject, year or stage acceleration, whole-class ability grouping within a mainstream setting and placement in an academically selective school setting (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). The social and emotional adjustment of the academically talented student has been addressed within the context of regular school settings, either in age-appropriate classes or through an accelerated option with older students. Consensus is that such students experience social difficulties relating to age peers who are not as academically advanced (Hoogeveen, van Hell & Verhoeven, 2012). Further difficulties are associated with interacting with older intellectual peers who are likely to be more emotionally mature than their younger cohort (Callahan, Cunningham & Plucker, 1994).

In comparing students who attended advanced coursework programs in a mainstream setting to those who did not, Barber and Wasson (2015) sought to measure the impact on friendship networks. Results indicated that those students participating in accelerated subjects were more likely to have more friends which subsequently promoted greater enjoyment of school, as compared to their peers attending regular coursework subjects. However, some research also noted better socioaffective outcomes for those in peer ability groups than for those in the accelerated group (Neihart, 2007). Extending the concept of ability grouping further, it has been concluded that placement in an academically selective school is just as advantageous for psychological outcomes as it is for academic results (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012). Nonetheless, research often focuses on academic outcomes rather than student wellbeing.

The big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE), for example, posits that a student's academic self-concept is based on social comparisons between the achievement levels of the individual and the average achievement levels of other students in the same cohort (Seaton et al., 2011). As such, studies of the BFLPE to date focus mainly on measuring academic performance (i.e., grades and ranking) rather than the social or emotional outcomes for these students. Nevertheless, the BFLPE is worth noting here, as attending an academically selective high school may find students who were ranked highly amongst their previous non-selective cohort now being ranked lower in the merit order. Thus, a further danger of social comparison based on academics is the



impact on psychological outcomes for these students. Schools may be able to moderate such impacts, however, by implementing pedagogies with cooperative orientations, thereby encouraging social supports within the student body (Marsh & Hau, 2003) and, by extension, facilitate the formation of peer relationships. Other socially supportive structures within schools have also shown to be useful to academically gifted students.

One retrospective study examined perceptions of how gifted and talented graduates felt supported during their secondary schooling (Salmela & Määttä, 2015; Wang & Neihart, 2015). Students perceived the availability of human resources which offered social and emotional support to be most useful. Close, reliable relationships and spending time with others with similar interests were particularly important. It was also identified that academically gifted students were more likely to seek support from peers rather than adults when faced with difficulties, further emphasising the importance of social relationships close enough to feel safe and comfortable to share personal concerns (Moulds, 2003). Additionally, schools that purposefully provided social support programs as part of the overall curriculum and school culture displayed higher positive outcomes for academically gifted students (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012).

### ***Distance and Social Isolation***

A potential impediment to the formation of secure school-based peer groups for students attending academically selective high schools is that of geographical distance between home and school. A recent Australian study examined links between loneliness and adverse mental health outcomes for adolescents from urban and rural schools (Houghton et al., 2016). Their findings showed that an increase in isolation from peers was associated with a decrease in positive mental wellbeing. Although the study examined mainstream schools, there are similar implications for academically selective high school students. Academically selective high schools in NSW are not subject to in-area enrolment restrictions and, as such, draw from a wide geographical area for their student body. Therefore, students are far more likely to travel outside of their local area catchment and attend high school with people they do not know. This is likely to make it difficult to stay in daily contact with existing primary school-based peer groups as well as to develop and maintain new high school peer groups outside of school hours. This disruption, therefore, may have negative consequences for normal social and emotional developmental.

Hence, it is imperative that schools that ensure the delivery of quality teaching and learning programs that meet the cognitive needs of these students also consciously and thoughtfully plan to address the overall wellbeing of their students. A large number of studies have suggested that placing intellectually gifted students with age-appropriate peers in an academically matched educational setting is more likely to promote positive academic outcomes. Further studies support the importance of facilitating social interactions for these students, and as such the development of positive mental health outcomes. However, few studies frame the successful student outcomes in terms of social and emotional adjustment, and fewer still have explicitly explored the role of the peer group in these terms.



## **Methodology**

The proposed qualitative research study will use peer groups as the starting point to explore the broader social and emotional implications for the gifted student in an academically selective secondary school setting. The literature review revealed that many studies in this field are quantitative by nature and explore the issues affecting gifted and talented students through the lens of academic results and academic self-concept. These approaches are empirically valid and important in informing actions to be taken by key stakeholders to improve student outcomes. However, the voice of the main stakeholders – the students – is currently underrepresented in the debate, particularly when addressing the social and emotional wellbeing of those academically selective school contexts.

In particular, this study is interested in exploring the three research questions:

- 1) How do secure peer groups affect social and emotional outcomes for adolescents attending academically selective high schools?
- 2) What factors contribute to the maintenance of secure peer groups outside of school hours?
- 3) In what way do students perceive that schools assist in the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups?

It is intended that the study will provide useful information for the executive team of academically selective high schools in order to plan targeted transition programs, ongoing welfare initiatives and effective interventions for their unique cohort of students.

This research project was approved by the relevant authorities and complies with all stated requirements. Two high schools agreed to participate in the study, with four students from each school contributing to the research. The eight participants in this study consisted of students currently attending academically selective government high schools in New South Wales. Participants were required to have attended their selective school setting from the beginning of Year 7. Five of the students were male and three were female. One student was in Year 8, four were in Year 10 and three were in Year 11. Participant ages ranged from 14 to 17 years of age.

Participants were randomly selected for inclusion in the study by the head teacher of wellbeing of each participating high school. Each student was provided with an information sheet outlining details of the research project as well as participant consent forms. An information sheet for their parents and parental consent forms were also provided and returned prior to meeting with the researcher.

The 21-item Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to measure participants' self-reported psychological wellbeing at the time of interview, as an objective comparative marker against qualitative data. Seven items each measured indicators of depression, anxiety and stress on a scale from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much or most of the time*). Scores for each affective descriptor could theoretically range between 0 and 21.

An interview schedule of demographic information and probe questions was used to guide questioning in the semi-structured interviews, conducted individually with each participant. The key questions were designed to prompt discussion around



personal experiences of school-based friendship groups (e.g., ‘Out of 10, how important is this school based friendship group to you?’, ‘What qualities do your friends have that you value most?’), explore factors which help maintain peer groups outside of school hours (e.g., ‘What factors make it difficult to spend time with your school based friends outside of school?’) and of student perceptions of the school’s role in forming and maintaining these relationships (e.g., ‘Tell me about some of the ongoing activities and initiatives that the school organises to help you stay socially connected during school hours’).

All student data were gathered individually in a quiet office on school premises. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged between 25 and 33 minutes in length. Audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were interrogated utilising iterative principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1995). Transcripts were analysed, in turn, with key words and phrases noted and loosely organised into emerging sub-themes. This process was repeated until no new information was evident and clear sub-themes were determined. Connections and commonalities between and within sub-themes were further investigated to produce master themes. Subsequent interpretation and reporting of findings maintained the confidentiality of participating students, schools and locations. Students were referred to by pseudonyms, school names were omitted and referred to as ‘primary school’ or ‘high school’ while suburb locations were referred to by general geographical descriptors such as ‘south west’.

## **Findings**

Findings of the current study showed that the social and emotional wellbeing of students attending academically selective high schools is positively affected by the quality of their school peer groups despite barriers which may impede socialisation outside of school hours. Further, having a bond toward at least one other school-based peer is likely to serve as a protective factor against some affective disorders. A school’s systemic socialisation initiatives overall have been found to play a weak role in the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups for their students. Findings for each research question follow.

### ***RQ1: How do secure peer groups affect social and emotional outcomes for adolescents attending academically selective high schools?***

To answer the first research question, data from individual DASS-21 questionnaires was examined in addition to the qualitative data gained from the demographic questions and the semi-structured interviews.

The Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to provide an objective measure of the participants’ emotional wellbeing at the time of interview, to provide additional information to the students’ narratives. Table 1 summarises the central findings of the DASS-21 questionnaire, along with peer group information for the eight student participants.

Of the eight students who participated in the study, three were symptom free, that is, self-rating in the normal range for all three sub-categories of depression, anxiety and stress within the two weeks prior to interview. Two students indicated elevated levels across all three domains of the DASS-21 questionnaire. One student self-rated as having extremely severe symptoms in two out of the three domains. Four



students rated themselves as having mild or moderate indicators typical of depression, with one student indicating extremely severe depressive symptoms. Three students indicated experiencing elevated symptoms of anxiety: one mildly, one moderately and one in the extremely severe range. Two students also indicated experiencing elevated symptoms of stress: one mildly and one in the extremely severe range. Half of the participant group reported not having a non-school based friendship group, with three of these four students self-rating with elevated symptoms in at least two of the three domains measured by the DASS-21.

**Table 1:** Summary of participant peer relationship categories and affective outcomes of DASS-21

Student	Best friend	Sub-group	Large group	Non-school friends	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Harry	no	yes	yes	yes	Mo	N	N
Lachlan	yes	yes	yes	yes	N	N	N
Yousef	no	no	yes	yes	Mo	N	N
Angela	yes	yes	yes	no	N	N	N
Ryan	yes	yes	yes	yes	N	N	N
Peter	yes	yes	yes	no	Mo	ES	ES
Maddy	yes	yes	yes	no	Mi	Mi	Mi
Sarah	yes	no	no	no	ES	Mo	N

*NB: DASS ratings. N = normal, Mi = mild, Mo = moderate, S = severe, ES = extremely severe*

Analysis of the interview data revealed that some students were better than others when articulating the attributes and values they found most important within differing social groups. Interestingly, the two male students who had the most difficulty in this area rated themselves as experiencing moderate levels of depressive symptomology on the DASS-21. Further, neither student had a close ‘best’ friend and both described themselves as comfortable with floating between the different groups in the playground at break times. Of the two students who rated themselves as experiencing elevated symptoms in all three domains of the DASS-21, both reported being part of their current peer group for approximately 18 months, in contrast to the other participants who have been part of their groups or a variation of the group for three or four years.

Further analysis of the interview data revealed that students described their friendship groups, and their personal connections to these groups, in several ways, which have been classified under the themes of: (1) *Close and Imperative*; (2) *Important*; and (3) *Convenient*. Qualities associated with each of these themes include group membership, closeness of connections, shared interests, acceptance of the authentic individual and shared values.

#### *Theme 1: Close and Imperative*

The *Close and Imperative* peer group is categorised as one or two best friends, to whom the student feels particularly close. Rating of importance of these relationships was likely to be an eight or higher out of ten. The members of the *Close and Imperative* group were most likely to share personal information and seek specific



advice of an intensely personal nature from one another, as well as providing emotional support. Members of this peer group were likely to share similar values and attitudes. Attributes of most importance in this group were honesty, humour and emotional support.

Trust and honesty emerged as being particularly important to the participants. Maddy for example reported that she tended “to tell everything” to her two best friends because “they’re honest and I can trust them.” Furthermore, secure peer relations provided individuals with a sense of having an ally to confide in and provide reciprocal emotional support:

It’s more emotional support, just being able to get anything off our chest and not feel so bottled up you know? Um the other person just comforts them and says it’s all right, you’ll be fine sort of thing. It’s good that way, I feel it’s better than someone telling you what you need to do, just someone who’s there to support you. (Sarah)

Another important feature of the *Close and Imperative* group was the development of an individual belief system. Several students highlighted that it was essential to be able to connect with like-minded others in order to explore personal attitudes. One student spoke of moving social groups to better reflect his developing personal principles:

but then I drifted off [from an old friendship group and] found this close knit couple of guys who I really enjoyed hanging out with especially ’cause I’m a Christian guy so we’re also like all Christian. (Ryan)

These responses from participants Maddy, Sarah and Ryan emphasise the importance of secure peer groups in the development of individuated identity during the adolescent period. They are consistent with findings which state that, in addition to immediate relationship worries, adolescents are concerned about social issues and relating to the world in general (Frydenberg, 2008).

The participants indicated that they were more hopeful of staying friends after high school with those in their *Close and Imperative* peer group than those friends in a broader friendship category. In commenting on maintaining a relationship with his *Close and Imperative* peer group into the future, Harry agreed, “Oh yeah definitely”. Similarly, Yousef was not as hopeful for the future of his wider friendship group “I don’t think [we’ll stay in contact]. I’d like to think so but I think that um unless we go to the same university or anything that we wouldn’t stay really strong”. Qualities of underlying importance to the *Close and Imperative* group are also likely to be shared across larger peer groupings but to a lesser extent. These friendships have been categorised under the theme of *Important*.

### *Theme 2: Important*

The *Important* peer group generally incorporated the *Close and Imperative* group for any individual student but also contained approximately three or four additional friends who could be relied on for companionship and shared interests. Information shared tended to be of a general nature, with the inclusion of humour being cited as a noted feature. Rating of the importance of these relationships was likely to be a five or



six out of ten. Qualities identified as characteristic of the *Important* peer group include acceptance of the authentic self and intellectual quality. Whilst the notion of authentic self was noted as a feature of the *Close and Imperative* peer groupings, it was most clearly expressed in relation to the larger sub-group to which individuals belonged:

[The friendship group is] just a better environment to express myself.  
(Lachlan)

I can act more serious at school as well, more so than at home, 'cause I'm the youngest at home but at school I can be as someone who's more mature ... before when I hung out with guys who played basketball and stuff ... I would change what I liked as well ... and I wanted to be like closer with them so to do that, I had to do what they did. So that would change how I act [sic].  
(Ryan)

Lachlan and Ryan's experiences suggest adolescents need to 'test out' thoughts and behaviours as a means to discover their identity as an individual, both within the group and apart from it. This notion is further exemplified by this student's account:

I wouldn't say they are like parts who make me who I am. I'm ... one person, they are one person. And my journey to life is ... I go on my life and they go along beside me. (Angela)

Student perceptions of being accepted for 'who I am' are consistent with normal social developmental expectations, whereby the individual moves away from family norms to, for example, align more closely with peers (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2015).

Several students raised the concept of intellectual quality being a valuable quality in their friendship groups:

I find that we definitely ... talk about things that other people don't talk about ... some of the conversations are really interesting and stuff and so I don't really find that with other people. (Yousef)

The grouping of students based on academic ability within selective high schools, therefore helps to facilitate intellectually appropriate thinking and discourse amongst peers. Moreover, the ability to indulge in higher-order discussion is likely to further contribute to feelings of acceptance of the authentic self. This social acceptance may, in turn, eliminate the need for students to 'dumb down' amongst their peers, thus counteracting the underachievement that some gifted students experience (Blass, 2014).

### *Theme 3: Convenient*

The *Convenient* peer group appeared to be one that could be joined if other peer group options were not available. Importance of the *Convenient* group was rated by the participants as low as two or three out of ten. The participants generally liked the others in the group but they perceived not having much in common other than sharing the same classes. Reasons to identify with the *Convenient* group included familiarity



with other members of the group and a desire for social inclusion. These factors were most intensely felt at the beginning of high school but persisted throughout the years.

[In relation to spending time with students we went to primary school with] we'd all kind of stand around at lunch or break because we didn't know anyone else but after a bit everyone just found their place, like meeting new people who were here. (Angela)

Luckily the girls from [primary school] all sort of stuck together for the first few weeks so you had lunches together and sort of made a little group, just a temporary thing until we found other people to go off with and that eventually happened. (Sarah)

I just hang out with them 'cause I've been friends with them like since Year 7 and that's it. (Maddy)

[We have] nothing much [in common], just we wouldn't know where else to go, it's just you want to be part of a group. (Sarah)

Through these accounts, Maddy and Sarah articulated a very human and developmentally appropriate desire for familiarity and social inclusion. Further, they sum up just how important connectedness to others, even in a peripheral or convenient way, is to an individual sense of wellbeing (Qualter et al., 2013).

Overall, peer groups may be categorised on a continuum from tenuous or convenient to reliable or secure. It is evident from the participants' perceptions that there is room for more than one type of friendship group in their lives, each serving a different purpose and each having a positive impact on their general wellbeing. Taken as a whole, the experiences outlined by the participants suggest that secure school-based peer groups provide a protected environment away from family in which to develop a sense of individual identity. For these students attending academically selective high schools, this priority is similar to mainstream counterparts (Hooegeveen, van Hell & Verhoeven, 2012).

***RQ2: What factors contribute to the maintenance of secure peer groups outside of school hours?***

Two themes emerged from analysis of the participants' perceptions of factors which contribute to maintaining their friendships outside of school hours: (1) *Time*, referring to the amount of this resource available to the students; and (2) *Distance*, which highlights the geographical restrictions of where students live in relation to one another and their school. Both master themes are largely considered by the students as barriers to how readily they can socialise with their peers when not at school. However, a further theme of (3) *Social Media* surfaced as a way to maintain peer links despite the barriers of time and distance.

*Theme 1: Time*

All students reported that *Time* was a distinct barrier to socialising with their peers when they weren't attending school. During the school term, family commitments, extra-curricular activities – either their own or those of their friends, work



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commitments and tutoring negatively impacted on the amount of time available for peer socialisation.

I guess we're into a phase of our lives that we need to spend a lot of time at home because we ... have other commitments ... work is definitely a big part ... a lot of my friends work the same hours as me ... it can be really tough.  
(Peter)

The students articulated that it was much easier to get together with their friends during the holidays than on weekends:

[We get together] usually in the holidays more so that during school term 'cause of studies and that gets in the way, and parents and stuff. But yeah we do hang out sometimes. (Ryan)

The extended time afforded by vacation periods allowed the adolescents to share experiences beyond those provided by merely attending the same school:

Well we'll go to the movies ... or we go down to the city to just go to museums and stuff. (Maddy)

The ability to socialise in the holidays, nevertheless is not without issue. Harry reported rarely seeing his friends in the holidays:

they live all over the place so like one of them might live [north west] or one of them might live [on the lower north shore] and I'm living [in the west] and that's sort of a bit hard, 'cause your parents are at work, to travel to them.  
(Harry)

In addition to *Time*, Harry's point regarding the geographical limitations of socialising with peers outside of school hours also segued to the second theme of *Distance*.

### *Theme 2: Distance*

*Distance*, in particular the distance that most students live from their school and their school peer group, had an impact in two ways. Firstly, the incidental socialisation period afforded to students through travelling together on public transport to and from school can be impeded.

There's definitely a lot of conversation on the train ... so as soon as you get to the station they're going on one platform and we're going on another so we don't socialise after that ... it does mean that we're probably not as close.  
(Yousef)

To further illustrate Yousef's point, the only student who lived close to her best friend described the positive impact that bus travel to and from school has had on their relationship formation and maintenance:

mainly because we live so close together for one and that we caught the same bus together because we just sat together every day on the way to and



from school and you know that's a lot of time, an hour and 40 minutes to talk. (Sarah)

In comparing Yousef and Sarah's experiences, *Distance* can be viewed as a positive, if not inconvenient, part of a student's socialisation to and from school, but only if an individual has a secure peer with whom to share the experience.

The secondary impact of *Distance* on peer relationships is that of logistical difficulties on weekends and in the holidays. The greatest impediment to connecting socially outside of school hours appeared to be transportation issues for these students who were yet to gain their driver's license and, therefore, reliant on public transport or parents to drive them:

I live north ... it can be quite hard ... a lot of my friends live [south] and I'm up at [home] so it gets difficult in that way. (Lachlan)

if you choose friends based on who lives near you and there's only about one person [at high school] who's within walking distance, not like primary school where you could walk to anyone's house and go there. (Harry)

Although distinct themes in their own right, *Time* and *Distance* are closely linked to one another and significant in that both seem to contribute to a sense of isolation for the participants. Loneliness brought about by isolation has been identified as a mediating factor between adolescent anxiety and depression (Ebesutani et al., 2015; Houghton et al., 2016).

### *Theme 3: Social Media*

The theme of *Social Media* emerged from the study as a means for the participants to facilitate peer socialisation outside of school hours. Students use a range of social media platforms to bridge the barriers of *Time* and *Distance* to stay connected, particularly at times of personal need.

on exchange earlier in the year, one of my friends was having quite some problems with one of her friends outside of the group, and you know that's how she contacted me, through Facebook and I gave her support. (Peter)

The participants indicated using features of *Social Media* in a similar way to how the peer groups are described. For example, the Messenger app that facilitates private conversations is commonly used to communicate with the *Close and Imperative* group in an exclusive manner and about personal concerns. The *Important* group might be included in a private chat about general topics of interest, to share jokes and memes, or to organise outings in the holidays. It would appear that members of the *Convenient* peer group were not included in private group conversations very often. Indeed, this pattern lends support to the premise that many individuals use social media as a way to meaningfully augment their off-line relationships in the absence of sufficient face-to-face time, thereby serving as a protective factor against negative social and emotional outcomes (Shaw & Gant, 2002).



***RQ3: In what way do students perceive that schools assist in the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups***

Students gave several examples of how they perceive their schools attempted to assist in forming secure peer groups among their cohort, and many examples were consistent across school sites. These examples emerged as the themes of: (1) *Interaction Initiatives*; and (2) *Social Programmes*. The students expressed strong opinions about the efficacy of the initiatives in place.

*Theme 1: Interaction Initiatives*

The theme of *Interaction Initiatives* incorporated formal initiatives that schools put in place for students to interact with one another. The first topic was transitioning from Year 6 into Year 7. Most students were able to talk with authority about what their schools had organised in order to facilitate transition to high school and to help establish friendship groups within their Year 7 cohort. Initiatives cited include peer support groups run by older students responsible for a small group of Year 7 students, Year 7 camps in the first few weeks at the beginning of the year and pedagogical practices which encouraged group work within academic tasks.

Peer support programs were viewed overall in a positive way, allowing students to meet others in their year in addition to being exposed to the ‘wisdom’ of older students:

I think it worked a fair bit ... I did make good friends out of it. And like some of them I’m not that close with anymore but we’re still friends which is cool.  
(Lachlan)

However, some participants, particularly those who knew two or three other students from their primary school when starting Year 7, found the peer support program less helpful:

it was done alphabetically so I was with a particular group of 10 students and then you know we didn’t really end up being friends. (Yousef)

Some of the reasons students cited for the perceived ineffectiveness of peer support groups included being grouped with students they did not share classes with and not living in the same area as the other students. This last point serves to strengthen points made by students relating to research question two, in that geographical barriers serve to hinder in-school peer group formation as well as after-school socialisation. Year 7 camps which were run in the first few weeks of the school year were reported to be most beneficial to peer group formation, possibly due to emphasis being explicitly placed on socialisation rather than academic pursuits:

we had our five day camp and that’s when you probably got to know people the best ... we got to make films and lots of fun things together so ... we got to know each other really well. (Harry)

Somewhat successful but more subject-content focused, was the integration of group work into each lesson for the first few weeks of Year 7:



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In Year 7 in all classes, we would do activities that would involve a lot of group work so that kind of helped [to get to know people] and group assignments so you'd do some research together. (Angela)

The second topic to emerge under the theme of *Interaction Initiatives* referred to enterprises which encourage the broader school cohort to interact with one another. Initiatives cited by the participants included home groups and houses (a mix of students from all years) and peer mentoring groups.

Home group, designed to facilitate discussion of various topics on a weekly basis was perceived by the participants as largely ineffective in forming friendships with those in their year or with students in other years:

[It is] kinda pointless, 'cause we didn't have a schedule. Everyone just sits there on their phone, yeah and I think our teacher kind of gave up 'cause he'd try to organise something but everyone would complain that it was really useless. (Maddy)

In theory it's a good concept but practically it's useless. No one really talks to other years and we're not doing much. It's kind of a waste of time really. (Sarah)

The concept of houses, another grouping of students which met on a semi-regular basis, has been designed by one school to link students who live in similar areas to one another, an idea which recognises the concerns raised by students in research question two. However, it seems that the potential of this premise has been compromised, with one student, Harry, stating that few students in his house live close to him.

### *Theme 2: Social Programmes*

The theme of *Social Programmes* refers to events organised by the school, and largely at the school, to provide opportunities for students to interact. Options cited by participants included dances and charity events, such as a sleep out for the homeless. Although aware of these activities, the participants reported having never attended or only attended once in the past. Reasons given ranged from scheduling clashes with extra-curricular activities, distance of activities from home and difficulties with transport and a lack of interest. The overriding impression, however, was that these activities were organised by 'others' and didn't readily reflect the participants' interests. Hence, initiatives which give students a greater voice in, and ownership of, activities may allow students to take roles as agents of change within their school communities, thereby encouraging greater overall participation in the future (Wilson et al., 2006).

In summary, despite the schools' best efforts, students perceived little value in many of the initiatives put in place to facilitate social connection between students within and across the year cohorts. It would seem that the true role of schools for these students was in providing a compulsory place to gather, in order to find their own way in the social milieu.



## **Discussion**

The findings from this study suggest that secure peer groups have a positive influence on the social and emotional outcomes of students who attend academically selective high schools. The formation and maintenance of school-based friendship groups, however, is hindered by a number of logistical constraints outside the control of the individual students. Further, the active role of schools in facilitating student wellbeing through the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups is seen by students as peripheral.

### ***RQ1: How do secure peer groups affect social and emotional outcomes for adolescents attending academically selective high schools?***

Consistent with previous research (Hughes & Kwok, 2007) participants indicated that the sense of belonging within a secure peer relationship provided an emotional support system, allowed for expression of authentic thoughts, feelings and behaviours and an opportunity to engage equally in intellectual discourse and frivolous teasing. Despite most study participants reporting membership of broad friendship groups of between ten and twenty peers – classified as *Convenient* groups – most strongly identified with one or two ‘best’ or *Close and Imperative* friends. The close bond between ‘best friends’ lends further support to the premise that the quality or security of a relationship is more of a psychological protective factor than the number of friends one has (Shilubane et al., 2012). This was emphasised by the accounts of the two participants who did not readily identify with a *Close and Imperative* group, with self-reports of low mood as indicated by the DASS-21 and difficulty with communicating what qualities they most valued within intimate and attached friendships.

Students with a close group of friends to confide in were more able to articulate the values they found most important to them in terms of friendships (e.g., trust and honesty) and felt more able to be their authentic selves, as compared to those participants with a less-secure peer network. These students also self-rated as having fewer elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety or stress. In this sense, attending an academically selective secondary school setting does not differ greatly when compared to their mainstream counterparts and supports accounts that have shown students who are satisfied with their relationships at school reported higher levels of emotional wellbeing (Rigby, 2003).

These positive outcomes are likely due to participants attending a wholly academically selective school, in contrast to their gifted counterparts in a mainstream setting. Like-ability student groupings have previously been found to garner small positive effects on social and emotional outcomes (Rogers, 2007). Certainly the opportunity to be their authentic selves and not having to dilute the intellectual quality of their social interactions may prove to be an emotionally protective factor for these students (Swiatek, 2001).

### ***RQ2: What factors contribute to the maintenance of secure peer groups outside of school hours?***

A number of barriers to maintaining peer socialisation outside of school hours appear to exist which, for some students, may negatively impact on broad emotional consequences for these individuals. For those students who may not feel as connected



to their school-based peer group, the sense of geographical isolation from friends, due to living in very different parts of the city, can further hinder opportunities to socialise outside of school hours. The physical distance is further compounded by transport issues with students having to rely on parents to drive them, or a reliance on public transport. This may be particularly pertinent for individuals who do not have a peer group outside of their school group or extra-curricular opportunities to socialise. For example, poorer emotional outcomes are more likely for adolescents experiencing loneliness brought about by isolation (Houghton et al., 2016) and can contribute to mental health problems into later life (Qualter et al., 2013). Therefore, some students may experience a doubling effect of social isolation brought about by geographical distance from school-based peers plus a lack of other peer groups, with resultant negative affect outcomes.

Another limiting factor in socialisation outside of school hours is a lack of time. This is to be expected to a degree due to the demanding study and assessment schedules of these students, particularly those in Stage 6. Additionally, several of the participants had part-time jobs and many had extra-curricular activities such as sports and music lessons, again to be expected due to the age of the participants. However, time restrictions were further impeded due to the distance between the locations of the homes of the peer group. School holidays were cited as the time most out-of-school socialising took place due to less-restrictive schedules during these periods. Once again, students at risk of social marginalisation, due to either insecure school-based peer bonds or a lack of non-school friendship groups, are likely to be placed further at risk if it is difficult to socialise face to face during these extended periods of free time.

Social media, ubiquitous with adolescent communication, not surprisingly emerged as somewhat of a protective factor against isolation for many of the participants, consistent with previous research in this area (Shaw & Gant, 2002). The barriers of *Time* and *Distance* were breached to an extent due to the immediacy and intimacy of the medium. The architecture of personal chat groups for example, tended to mirror the make up of peer structures. *Close and Imperative* groups tended to share one virtual space for personal interactions, whilst the larger friendship group shared another space for general exchanges. In providing socially supportive structures for their students, academically selective schools may want to consider actively encouraging their students to engage with social media in a positive and prosocial manner.

***RQ3: In what way do students perceive that schools assist in the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups***

In the investigation of the final research question, school-based initiatives designed to facilitate social connection between students were perceived by the participants to be, by and large, insufficient. Students recognised schools as attempting to encourage social interaction in a number of different ways which were categorised as *Interaction Initiatives* and *Social Programmes*. Some initiatives were seen by students to be more successful than others.

*Interaction Initiatives* designed to ease the transition to high school, such as peer support groups, were considered to offer initial social contact between Year 7 students from different primary schools but were more likely to be identified as helping students to learn ‘how to do high school’ rather than helping to form



friendships. Further, students who came to high school knowing two or more other students from their primary school found the transition program less useful than students who did not know anyone or only one other student. There was a strong sense from students that programs and initiatives designed to promote socialisation were contrived by ‘others’, such as staff members or students (e.g., student representative council). Participation in activities such as school dances were also reported to be undertaken by ‘others’. This is an important perception to note.

Arguably the core stakeholders of any educational service are the students. Yet it is these clients who are seldom consulted or, more powerfully, collaborated with, as to how they view their experiences at school. Youth enabling programs which are underpinned by a strength-based, participatory paradigm have the ability to increase individual protective factors, as well as the potential to disseminate to a broader peer and community base through adolescents actively engaging in activities such as student-run socialisation programs (Morton & Montgomery, 2013).

### **Implications for Educators**

Findings from this study suggest several implications for school executive and administrators when planning effective supports for students of academically selective high schools. Firstly, students transitioning from primary school to selective high schools are socially and emotionally vulnerable. This is particularly true for individuals who are the only students from their Year 6 to attend the high school. Therefore, it is imperative that schools acknowledge this vulnerability by planning and implementing useful and supportive transition programs. Drawing on the experiences of past students may be a useful first step. For example, attending camp within the first few weeks of school commencing were perceived by the participants to be a positive factor in peer group formation as compared to peer support groups. Secondly, schools should be encouraged to address the barriers raised due to the geographical distance of their students’ homes from the school. This may be as simple as planning social programmes within school hours. Once again, the voice of the student is necessary to ensure participatory ownership and inclusive uptake of the initiatives. Thirdly, the pressure for all schools to show sustained growth in academic outcomes undoubtedly places emphasis on planning for appropriately challenging curriculum and quality pedagogy, rather than the underpinning of student welfare and wellbeing initiatives. However, the Wellbeing Framework (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015) clearly states that each wellbeing domain symbiotically supports the other. It is, therefore, essential that academically selective high schools investigate how the wellbeing of their unique cohort can support student outcomes across the domains.

In much broader systemic terms, NSW Department of Education policy and procedure could give consideration to ‘drawing area cut offs’ for each selective high school, similar to zoned areas of catchment for comprehensive high schools. However, this proposal has obvious implications for candidature quality if placement test scores need to be lowered to fill places based on this scenario. Therefore, an alternative may be to increase the number and distribution of wholly or partially academic selective high schools across the state, thus supporting availability of academically appropriate settings as well as catering for the social and emotional



needs of these gifted and talented students. Indeed the socio-affective benefits of partially academically selective schools have been noted by Batterjee (2014).

### **Limitations and Areas for Further Research**

Although these findings are important they are by no means exhaustive and without limitations. The research design limited the scope of outcomes to a certain extent. The qualitative nature of the study, for example, limited the number of participants and participating schools, making it difficult to generalise findings to the broader academically selective cohort. Further, interrogation of the interview transcripts highlighted several missed opportunities to probe further into some students' responses. Constraints around the research timeline and availability of participants impeded conducting follow-up sessions to clarify and mine further, emergent topics (Willig, 2008).

A further limitation relates to the cohort of interest. The participants included in this research were largely in years 10 and 11 and it was identified by the researcher during the interview phase that these adolescents had begun to identify important relationship qualities, particularly with intimate peers. This ability is likely to be affected by experience and maturation, and participants alluded to the difficulties of the early high school years, especially Year 7. Transition from primary to high school is a time when students are not only navigating a new and vastly different educational experience, but inexperience and immaturity make it difficult for individuals to find their social fit in a timely manner (Sarkova et al., 2014). Therefore, research involving years 7 and 8 students may provide further elucidation of the current research questions.

It is acknowledged that peer groups formed as a result of like-student grouping is unlikely to exclusively affect the social and emotional outcomes for students attending academically selective high schools. It is expected that there are many variables (e.g., individual temperament, family support and levels of resilience) which directly contribute individual outcomes (Rogers, 2002). Accordingly, further research which explores these possibilities would be useful in providing a broader picture of this cohort. In particular, an interesting and somewhat surprising finding from this study relates to the participants who did not have an additional friendship group outside of their school-based peer group. Three of the four participants who reported not having an ancillary group self-rated with elevated scores in at least two of the emotional domains measured. A number of questions are raised from this result. These include: of the cohort who reported both a school-based and outside peer network, is one group more important to the individual than the other and does having a range of potential friendship connections exponentially increase social and emotional wellbeing?; and, for those individuals who have limited social resources, what additional factors such as temperament or cognitive ability mediate affective outcomes?

Finally, the valued voice of the academically gifted mainstream student is missing from this narrative. Their experiences may provide valuable comparative insights that could be used to enhance the experience of all academically gifted students. Similar enlightenment may also be available from a wider range of grouping scenarios and educational systems.



## **Conclusion**

The present research set out to add the students' voice to existing research into academically selective education. Certainly the narrative of friendship parsed by the students who participated in this study highlights the perceived importance of intimate relationships and supportive peer bonds to the social and emotional wellbeing of the adolescent. For students attending academically selective high schools, the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups may be more difficult than for their mainstream peers. However, it seems that with maturation these individuals generally 'find their level' amongst their cohort, regardless of the barriers and supports placed before them.

As such, the findings herein provide useful feedback to the executive teams of academically selective high schools and policy makers in addressing the social wellbeing of their students. Being aware of the real and perceived factors which contribute to the formation and maintenance of secure peer groups is vital in planning and implementing effective and inclusive programs and initiatives. Thus, the challenge for a school executive, together with their student body, is to further identify and address the social and emotional vulnerabilities of students within their unique setting in addition to, and in support of, academic programming.

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