Perceptions of Students and Parents of Full-time Opportunity Classes for Gifted
Students in a Western Australian Primary School

By

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Provision for students who are gifted is an unresolved issue in education. To meet the needs of its own academically gifted students, one primary school in Western Australia customised the Opportunity Class model used by New South Wales Primary Schools. This study focused on participants’ experiences of the school’s full-time academic Opportunity Classes. Twenty-four parents and eleven students who had firsthand experience of the program were interviewed about their experiences. Data were collected through focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with questions designed to address ability class issues most commonly raised in the literature. In particular, participants were asked to share their personal perceptions of the program and to recollect other gifted provisions these mildly, and moderately gifted students had experienced. They were asked to consider how each met student’s academic and social-emotional needs with the focus being on the full-time ability-grouping model. Results show that despite being an academically based program, the social-emotional effects of the program were deemed by participants to be just as important. The implications were that it was possible for a range of academically gifted students to thrive in full-time ability classes and for the effects of the big-fish-little-pond effect, labelling and force choice dilemma to be reduced or eliminated in a program with the appropriate cultural and emotional support.

Keywords: Perception, Opportunity Class, full-time academic-selective, gifted, ability grouping
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Author

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Chapter 1: Introduction

How schools can best provide for the needs of their students who are gifted is one of the unresolved issues surrounding gifted education. This lack of resolution is partially due to research findings that conflict, leaving many educators unsure of which students need what kind of special education considerations and provisions (Gallagher, Harradine, & Coleman, 2010; McCann, 2005; Rogers, 2002).

This chapter begins with a statement of the problem, the research question, intended audience and significance before it shares the research and program background that is central to this study and the questions asked.

Statement of the Problem

It is unclear if gifted students’ needs are being met at school. There is a belief that as gifted students can reach general expected academic standards by themselves, they do not need specialist support in schools (Australian Parliament Senate, 2001; Beattie, Watters, Stewart, & Devlin, 2006; Cathcart, 2005; Porter, 2005; Sousa, 2009). The important question is, do the needs of students who are gifted go beyond reaching the general expected academic standards set by the national curriculum? If so, what are they and what is the best way to cater for these?

The Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented Ltd, in a submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training in 2006 maintained that a key “fundamental requirement for gifted students is that the learning experiences they have are commensurate with their abilities“ (Beattie et al., 2006, p. 2). They went on to say, that due to a lack of knowledge and understanding, most students who
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are gifted do not receive an effective and appropriate education. The Senate in its summary and recommendations found that there was overwhelming agreement that there is a problem with gifted education in Australia as these students have special needs that are not always being met (Australian Parliament Senate, 2001). The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians released by Ministerial Council on Education and Youth (2008) set two primary goals with elaborations around the expectations of education in Australia. First, that equity and excellence are promoted by schools, including “personalised learning that aims to fulfil the diverse capabilities of each young Australian” (p. 7) and second, that students are “motivated to reach their full potential” (p. 19).

The Australian Parliament Senate (2001) found that many submissions were in agreement that gifted students had special education needs, but not all stated that these ought to be met within the mixed-ability classroom or an ability group. The NSW Teachers Federation submitted the statement that “the available research suggests that they [selective schools and classes] are not increasing the academic performance of these students, their self-esteem or their perceptions of, and ability to function in, the society in which they live” (p. 64). Whilst a recent meta-analyses of research by Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius (2016) in America found that students both generally benefited academically from within-class ability grouping with gifted students benefiting more from being ability grouped in programs specially designed to serve their needs. After considering all proposals submitted, the committee found that fully selective schooling is a very controversial issue and in its final summary recommended that more research is needed. In its summary, Australian Parliament Senate (2001) proposed that:

The Commonwealth should propose to MCEETYA that states with selective schools or classes should research the effects of selective schooling, including a comparison of
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the fully selective model and the focus class model (a selective high ability group
within an otherwise comprehensive school). (pp. XV, Recommendation 7, paragraph
3.110)

My aim through this study is to contribute to Australian research on the effects of
ability grouping of gifted students, by exploring if the Opportunity Class (focus class model)
adopted at Pondview Primary School was successful in providing a learning experience that
was commensurate with the needs of the school’s population of gifted students. Moreover,
the study seeks to establish how effective the program was from the participants’
perspectives, both in its own right and when compared to other provisions previously
experienced.

Research Question

The primary research question is:

What do students and parents perceive as the effects of being in the school’s full-
time academic selective program on student’s academic performance and their
social and emotional wellbeing?

Three sub-questions that were used to support this question are:

a) How are students selected and who should teach the program?

b) How does the offered provision compare to other gifted provisions
previously experienced by participants?

c) What are the program’s opportunities and constraints, especially in
relation to the existing literature on gifted education?
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Intended Audience

There are four intended audiences of this research. The first is education policy makers, and the second is other large schools that have the capability of employing similar programs due to their large student bodies, third, Pondview and its community and fourth the wider research community. For this program to be a successful option for the school and other education providers, its effectiveness as a GATE provision requires exploration and documentation.

Significance

The argument about the effectiveness of full-time ability grouping as an effective provision for gifted students is still unresolved. The research that is available primarily focuses on the experiences of older students and those who are identified as being highly to extremely gifted. Available research also often reports on a single aspect of a student’s experience and therefore is not able to comment on the overall effect of this type of provision. This research aims to explore full-time ability grouping as an option for younger and a broader range of gifted students. It is expected that this research will add new knowledge to the debate on this topic, nationally and internationally.

The program central to this research is significant in that it is unique when compared to other Opportunity Class programs (Appendix A), including those in Australia. It selects students with academic talents in the top 10% of an intellectual, academic subject area, it reselects annually, and only selects students from the school’s student body (i.e. there is no outreach to attract students from other school districts). In specifically examining the effects of the focus class model in an Australian context, the study directly responds to the need to research fully selective classes (Australian Parliament Senate Inquiry, 2001) from a state that traditionally has not provided this option for its primary school students.
Teachers both within the school and from other schools have informally inquired about and sometimes questioned, the program. These teachers have asked for evidence about the program’s appropriateness and effectiveness. Some schools have inquired about the program with an intention to consider a similar practice, but none have pursued it any further, expressing that the lack of clearly documented evidence of the benefits of this option makes it a leap of faith instead of a well-researched choice. This research into the perceived effects of the selective or focus class model at Pondview is significant in attempting to address the uncertainty of the opportunities and constraints of this type of gifted provision. It will assist in the search for suitable ways to meet the needs of gifted students as recommended by the Australian Parliament Senate Committee Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Children (2001).

For the school, this research is important in creating a shared understanding of the provision for its gifted students. By studying the way parents and students perceive and experience the Opportunity Classes, the school will be informed of the perceived opportunities and constraints associated with the program. The school will have the chance to adjust the program where deemed necessary and appropriate in response to the research findings.

**Background**

For the school participating in this study, the lack of clarity found in gifted education research presented a challenge as it endeavoured to develop its own gifted policy and programs. For ease of reference, the school described in this study will be referred to as Pondview Primary School. Being a newly built school with a rapidly growing population, there were many roles available for teachers who wished to assist in the school’s
Based on this knowledge and with the support of other teachers, I identified students as gifted if they were highly successful in all academic domains; they finished their work quickly and to the highest standard. The identified gifted population was then catered for through access to different work on the computers and worksheets from year levels higher than the student’s current level. In my classroom, I usually checked on the work of students identified as gifted only after I had assisted the students who often had difficulties. I believed that students who were gifted were smart enough to function in the world and would be okay now and in their futures. As student numbers continued to grow at the school, I coordinated pull-out and withdrawal programs for students who were identified as gifted in the upper and middle primary grades.

Upon viewing a video called Top Ten Myths of Gifted Education (Maryland Public School, 2003), my personal beliefs about gifted education began to shift and was inspired to seek further proof. I started with the question of why others and I accepted that a gifted athlete needs a specialist coach and training to reach the pinnacle of their abilities but felt resistance to students who were academically gifted receiving the same. Over time and with more research my views continued to change, and I began to see gifted students not as the lucky ones that would be okay in the world, but as the students who were not getting a fair chance to do their best. As a student, they were as deserving of learning experiences that were commensurate with their needs and the same amount of the teacher’s time as all other students. With these new considerations in mind, a new way of providing for the school’s gifted population was sought. The Opportunity Class focus group provision used in NSW
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(State of New South Wales, 2017) appeared to be a suitable basis on which to develop a program.

As I began my own degree in Gifted Education, the Opportunity Class model was adjusted to reflect the school philosophy and address some of the issues raised in the literature I had been reading as part of a postgraduate qualification in gifted and talented education. The program continued to evolve over the next year, and even though it was different from the program from which it was developed, it continued to be known to the school community as the Opportunity Classes. In its final form, the program consisted of two full-time, multi-aged, academic ability classes that catered to students who were academically gifted and in Years 3-7. Only students from the school’s local intake area were accepted, individual program membership was reviewed annually and selection of class members for the following year was based on demonstrated and potential academic ability.

As Pondview’s GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) coordinator and a teacher of one of the fully selective classes, I had daily encounters with the students and their experiences in the program. The inspiration for this research originated from the differences I observed in students’ academic and social-emotional wellbeing compared to those being reported in some studies on ability grouping (a theme I will take up later in this thesis). As expressed by Campbell (2013), as a practitioner teacher I was in a unique position to provide insights into responses and a voice to teachers. I would be able to promote the program to mine and other schools or dissuade them from full-time ability grouping, depending on the results. A frank and evidence based discussion could be possible with peers who were calling for gifted students to return to the mixed-ability class as role models. Evidence was sought to test my perceptions that students in the Opportunity Class were benefiting from the program socially and emotionally. I was looking to understand the effects of the program on
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students, if any new issues were being created by their participation and if the program
offered an improved provision compared to the mixed-ability option.

The Program at Pondview Primary School

The program at Pondview Primary School consisted of two full-time focus/selective
high ability classes known as Opportunity Classes to the participants. These classes were
housed within an otherwise comprehensive school and had the primary purpose of providing
the school’s gifted students with opportunities for them to develop their individual talent.
Pondview Primary School used the term Opportunity Class to describe its GATE program as
it was thought to aptly described its purpose. For consistency, throughout the study, the
program and the classes will be referred to as the Opportunity Classes.

At the time of the data collection, the school had been operating for seven years and
the program for four of these years. Physically the Opportunity Classes were not obvious or
identifiable. To the casual observer and many of the participants, the classes looked like any
other in the school and were hard to identify. The classes were located amongst the other
classrooms and named by their location within the school, making them outwardly no
different to any other in the school.

The initial senior Opportunity Class consisted of three-year levels (Years 5, 6 and 7),
due to the smaller population at the upper end of the school. It was adjusted to a two-year
spread as soon as enough gifted students were identified to form a class. The senior class for
Years 5, 6 and 7 students focused more on preparing students for their academic futures.
Selection of students for the senior class relied more on testing and past class performances.
The junior program was always a Year 3-4, multi-aged grouped class. It included a greater
number of students who were potentially underachieving and those with talents in only one
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learning area. For the junior class, teacher observations and verbal demonstration of potential had a greater role in student selection. Within the confines of the classroom, the students still had to demonstrate an understanding of the concepts covered in the mandated national curriculum and participate in all whole school activities and programs. The difference was that all students in the class were identified as academically gifted or talented and learning was designed under the guidance of a teacher trained in gifted and talented education.

Overall, the school aimed to take advantage of its size to provide an educational program that addressed students’ different abilities, learning preferences and personalities.

The population of gifted students in each class was different from students in many other full-time academic focus or opportunity classes found in the literature. First, the students were primary school aged with participants ranging from 7 to 11 years old. Second, as student selection was restricted to the school population, most students in this program were considered to fall within the mildly to the moderately gifted range, which was broader than other programs. Third, students in this program were in the only two ability-grouped classes in the school. Each class was multi-age grouped, and classes were filled with the maximum numbers allowed for the respective year level. Finally, reselection occurred annually, and students did not need gifts or talents in all learning areas to be accepted into the program. More details on the program and a comparison to other Opportunity classes are set out in Appendix A.

The definition of gifted used in this research is based on Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT). This model separates gifts from talents. Gagné (2007) classifies people as gifted when they hold natural abilities in the top 10% of a domain compared to their peers. They are talented when they are able to demonstrate skill mastery in the top 10% of a field compared to their peers. Pondview Primary School used Gagné’s
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definition to set its selection criteria for the Opportunity Class program. The school chose students demonstrating or indicating the potential to academically perform in at least the top 8-10% of their peers in an academic area, and or have demonstrated potentially high levels of creativity as it related to academic tasks. As no formal Intelligence Quotient test was used to measure student’s IQ, the actual level of Opportunity Class student’s giftedness is unknown. Using Gagné’s DMGT metric-based system of gifted levels and the school’s student population, it is assumed that most students in the program were mildly to moderately gifted with possibly a few highly-gifted students entering the program at some point.

Thesis Structure

In this dissertation, I report an investigation of Pondview’s approach to catering for their gifted student population and reflect on how it compares to relevant literature. In the research, I explore the perception of the parents and the students: about the ways the program met their needs and, managed to avoid reported pitfalls of full-time ability grouping and to gain suggestions on ways to improve and modify the program. With the belief that education is about the whole child and that academic learning and social-emotional wellbeing are integrally linked, I sought responses from participants in each of these areas.

In Chapter 1 the background, significance and aims of the study were outlined. In Chapter 2, the literature related to identifying and providing for gifted students is reviewed and discussed. The methodology, method and research paradigms are set out in Chapter 3, and in Chapter 4 the results of the study are reported. In Chapter 5 the findings are discussed in relation to the literature on provision for gifted and talented students, with recommendations for practice and future research.
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

Scope of the Review

As Australia is the context of this study, I begin the literature review with a brief review of Australia’s education policies and provisions for gifted students. This is followed by defining the purpose of gifted education and a definition of gifted and talented. The literature review continues with an analysis of research on mixed-ability classrooms, ability grouping, and research concerning the students and teachers in these program types. The review concludes with a consideration of the literature on academic challenges of the program and the social-emotional impacts of gifted and talented provision.

Finding literature directly relevant to the study was difficult. Many articles, books, and academic papers have been written on gifted education and giftedness, but I found no published work that directly mirrored the model and the students in this study. The research I could locate that examined the global academic, social, and emotional effects of full-time academic selective classes together and from the student’s perspective was published by Vidergor and Azar (2015) and Eddles-Hirsch, McCormick, Rogers, and Vialle (2010). The parent’s perspective was reported in Chessor and Whitton (2005). Studies by Vidergor and Azar (2015) and Chessor and Whitton (2005) are of programs that accept students from a variety of schools, who demonstrate a range of gifts and talents in the top 1-3% of their peers. Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2010) did not specify the students’ levels of giftedness or details about the class composition. Unlike participants in other published research, all students in Pondview’s Opportunity Classes are selected from the school’s population and are predominately mildly to moderately gifted. These variances can affect the program and the participants’ experiences.
The Literature Review

Policies and Recent Australian Trends

During a Senate inquiry in 2001 into gifted education in Australia, it was agreed by The Australian Parliament Senate Committee that a national policy to guide the education of gifted and talented students would be “an appropriate goal” (2001, p. xvii). In 2008 The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals released by Ministerial Council on Education and Youth (2008) outlined two overarching goals for schools in Australia. One goal is to promote equity and excellence and the second, for all students to “become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens” (p. 7). The declaration went on to state that schools need to provide all of their students with opportunities that would assist the students to build on their gifts and talents. This declaration was subsequently followed in 2010 by The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) who defined the purpose of schools in Australia as ensuring that students “acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy” (COAG Reform Council, 2010, p. xv). These documents did not elaborate on or address the specific needs of gifted and talented students or deliver a national gifted policy. Instead, they left the question of what does it mean to deliver education equitably?

In 2017, Australia still does not have a national policy for educating gifted and talented students. However, there is an Australian national curriculum that specifically mentions the educational needs of these students. The national curriculum was published by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2011 and dedicates a section to gifted and talented students. Within this section, Gagné’s 2008 Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) is referred to specifically as a pivotal resource and highlights the need for learning opportunities to be adjusted for individual needs of GAT students (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting
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Authority, 2016b). Since the release of the curriculum, most States have updated or created their own gifted and talented policies, but there is still no national policy and no agreed way of providing for students’ needs in an equitable learning environment.

Western Australia (WA), the site of the current study, has a gifted and talent policy but the responsibility for interpreting it and providing for gifted primary school students resides primarily with the school and the classroom teachers. The Primary Extension and Challenge program (PEAC), a long-running WA State provision becomes available for some students when they are in Year 5. The PEAC program aims to offer the most gifted students the opportunity to work with like-minded peers for a few hours a week. This program has been a half-day a week, pull-out program for Year 5-6 students attending State government primary schools. All Year 4 students in state schools are required to sit the standardised test and places are offered to those who score in the top 2-3%. Unfortunately, pull-out models such as these have been known to give schools the impression that all gifted students have been identified and catered for (Gagné, 2007) and therefore any additional classroom provisions are unnecessary. When part-time provisions for the most gifted students are in place, educators may fail to account for the fact that these programs only cater for students’ needs part of the time and are not available to all the gifted population.

The Education Department of New South Wales has addressed the part-time provision issue by opting to provide for its most gifted primary school students through full-time focus classes. These classes are often within a preapproved comprehensive government school and available from Year 5 onwards. They aim to cater for the top 2-3% of all academically talented students 100% of the time. Movement of students to schools and classes for gifted education has left some of the original schools feeling that they have been left without their most academically able pupils, their school leaders and role models.
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(Australian Parliament Senate, 2001; Parliament of Victoria, 2012). This movement of students has also led to some educators believing that all the gifted students have gone and therefore catering for gifted students no longer required. Using Gagné’s “10% of the population are gifted” DGMT guide (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011), this would mean that at least 7% of students not in GATE programs are more than likely not been offered an appropriate level of provision. An alternative option to the above provisions could be for schools with large primary school populations to create their own fully selective classes within the comprehensive school setting. This option allows for the retention of the school’s diversity and population while addressing the needs of their gifted population on a full-time basis.

The Long-Term Goals for Gifted Students

If the long-term purpose of education is to prepare students to be effective members of society, then the emphasis in teaching these students must go beyond pure academic success. Bernal’s (2003) Growing Giftedness Model supports the notion that part-time gifted provisions and mixed-ability classrooms are not appropriate environments for gifted students to fully develop their potential and evolve into the adults they can become. Bernal (2003) believes:

The mere education of gifted students should not be the goal. GT (gifted and talented) education should be about producing the next generation of gifted adults, not only by educating them in unusual ways and to very high levels that cannot be realistically accommodated in regular classrooms or part-time gifted programs, but also, and most importantly, by developing the personal qualities that support giftedness in adulthood. (p. 189)

Educators want their students to not only meet the minimum standards but to reach
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their potential, be interested, lifelong learners and be successful socially and emotionally in a way that maximises their ability to contribute to society as adults. The expectation that all students will achieve minimum standards on national high stakes testing regularly determines the curriculum that is taught in a mixed-ability class and which students receive the greatest attention. As gifted students regularly reach expected academic standards with minimal effort, an assumption is sometimes made by teachers that they will succeed academically both now and in the future, without the need for additional support (Cathcart, 2005; Maryland Public School, 2003; Silverman, 2013). Many gifted students do continue to reach minimum benchmarks because of their natural abilities, but these may not be the level of their potential, rendering them underachievers (Robinson, 2002).

The Gifted Domain

Gifted students do not always become talented. Some students with gifts become underachievers as their natural abilities do not develop into talents commensurate with their potential ability (Reis, 2003; Robinson, 2002). The Department of Education Western Australia, Talented Guidelines used by WA schools defines giftedness as “the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain.” Talent is defined as “the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities,” with talent emerging “from ability as a consequence of the student’s learning experience” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011, p. 3). Schools play an important part in helping a student to reach their potential by providing appropriate learning experiences to enable students’ gifts to become talents. To ensure any provision offered is relevant to the level and area of ability of each student, schools must recognise that not all gifted students are the same; they vary in personalities, priorities, the domain of their ability and the degree of potential they have in that learning area. Gagné outlined with the DMGT that gifts and talents correspond to distinct types of abilities. He argued that the “four domains entertain
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only low or null correlations with one another: thus, intellectually gifted individuals are not necessarily gifted creatively, socially, or physically” (Gagné, 2007, p. 94). Being gifted has a biological element to it but to display that talent and remain gifted in the eyes of others takes commitment and effort over a sustained period (Gagné, 2007; Matthews & Dai, 2014).

In schools, gifted education often refers to students whose gifts are primarily in the academic domain and whose potential falls within the mild to moderate levels, as many exceptionally gifted children find schools are unable to meet their needs (Gagné, 2007). Gagné (2007) advocates the use of the term IGAT (Intellectual Gifted and Academically Talented) to define those students most commonly identified by schools as suitable for their GATE programs to clarify that not all gifts are recognised or catered for by schools. Educators must be clear about the goals of their gifted programs to be able to identify which types of students would benefit from participating in the program offered.

Catering for Gifted Students in Mixed-ability Classes

Gifted students, especially the moderately and mildly gifted IGAT students can be catered for in a mixed-ability class (Silverman, 2013). Ideally, the regular curriculum could be adjusted to meet their needs, they could, for example, be the leaders, especially during cooperative learning sessions and they could help other students. The actuality found by Gallagher et al. (2010) is that the reality is not always reflective of the ideal. The more removed a gifted child is from the norm, the more assistance they need (Silverman, 2013) but even for students closer to the norm, mixed-ability classes may cause harm by the lack of gain these students make (Slavin, as cited in Allan, 1991). Benbow and Stanley (1996) suggest non-grouping or a lack of curriculum differentiation could amount to malpractice.
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Teachers aim to be fair, unbiased, and to differentiate the curriculum to meet the individual social and academic needs of all their students. In Australian schools, teachers are now expected to deliver a curriculum that is more tailored and creative to a class of students who have more diverse and specialised learning needs, cultural backgrounds and behaviour and motivation issues than previously found in classrooms (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2016a; Gagné, 2007). In countries with high stakes testing, as is the case in Australia, teachers are more likely to be pressed to explain how they are helping underachieving students compared to those reaching satisfactory outcomes, resulting in a greater focus on students who struggle (Gagné, 2007).

In a room full of challenges, the workload demand on teachers has not abated, and therefore the needs of many gifted students can go unmet (Archambault Jr et al., 1993; Gallagher et al., 2010).

In efforts to meet the needs of their classes, teachers have sometimes asked gifted and academically successful students to help teach the other students or lead cooperative groups where they often take on the majority of the group work (Colangelo & Davis, 1997). A recent Australian study found that a small percentage of preservice teachers still see students with gifts as a possible resource to lead groups and teach their peers (Watters, Hudson, & Hudson, 2013). Utilising gifted students as a role model has been found to be of questionable value (Allan, 1991; Bernal, 2003) as students usually look up to successful learners who are of a similar ability to themselves, not gifted students (Allan, 1991). Using students as tutors have been regarded as morally questionable (Adams-Byers, Squilkr Whitsell, & Moon, 2004) as students come to school to be learners rather than tutors of less able students (Kanevsky, 2011). GAT students need their own role models (Hertzog & Bennett, 2004), instructions and appropriate curriculum to make the most of their own development opportunities. The question becomes: what responsibility do students hold for
The thorniest issue concerning grouping and the gifted is whether the gifted are needed in the regular classroom to act as role models for other students and whether this use of gifted students is more important than their own educational needs. (p. 64)

Kulik and Kulik (1992) supported Allan in arguing that there are benefits in removing gifted students from the regular classroom to others as well as to themselves. It has been shown that by removing gifted students from the classroom the motivation and self-confidence of lower achievers can be raised (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Classes without gifted students also give other students the opportunity and confidence to take on both social and academic leadership roles (Adams-Byers et al., 2004).

If gifted students are to be catered for within the regular classroom, schools have several options they could employ to improve the chances of gifted students’ needs being met. Students can be accelerated into higher grades temporarily for individual subjects or on a full-time permanent basis at any point in their education, including early entry into school.

Full-time grade acceleration option has been shown to have positive academic effects but is underutilised (Colangelo, S, & M, 2004; Gagné, 2007; Rogers, 2007; Silverman, 2013). The Department of Education in WA regards acceleration as an “option for a small number of exceptionally gifted students” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011, p. 11) with the final decision residing at the discretion of the relevant school’s Principal. This is problematic because not all principals are trained in gifted education, and this may underlie its underutilisation.
Pull-out programs, within class subject ability grouping, multi-age grouping and student cluster grouping allows for the curriculum to be more easily differentiated for all levels of ability in the class. Pull-out programs are designed to group students in their areas of strengths or weakness for sessions outside of their regular classes. The issues with pull-out models are that they offer a part-time solution to a full-time problem, they require extra space, staff and therefore funding (Bernal, 2003; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011; Gagné, 2007). Pull-out models do have an advantage of allowing a focus to be placed at the point of need (Archambault Jr et al., 1993). Ideally, through within-class ability grouping and clusters, teachers can further differentiate for gifted students. In reality, provisions for gifted students are often minor, infrequent, and not done well (Archambault Jr et al., 1993; Gagné, 2007). They often depend on the skill and willingness of the individual teacher and rarely extend to all subject areas (Jarvis & Henderson, 2015).

With only one to three students in each class being likely to be gifted, clustering can be difficult to organise, and differentiating can be time-consuming without also combining year levels. Multi-age grouping has been found by Kulik and Kulik (1992) to have little effect on student achievement by itself. Studies by Brulles and Winebrenner (2011) and Rogers (2007) found that students in multi-age grouped classes enjoyed school more, were more socially advanced and had access to more advanced content. Cluster grouping is also cost neutral and encourages teachers to apply differentiation more consistently once a critical mass of four to five students showing talents in the same area are placed together in the same class (Bacal, 2015; Bernal, 2003; Rogers, 2007). This form of ability grouping makes it “more possible for the teacher to provide instruction that is neither too easy nor too hard for most students” (Slavin, 1987, p. 296). When clustered, students “take more academic risks and challenge each other” (Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011, p. 39).
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Should Ability Groups Be Used?

Inconsistent and conflicting research on ability grouping has made it difficult to analyse this strategy as a provision for gifted students. The term ability grouping has carried many different meanings over time (Kulik, 2003; Neihart, 2007; Slavin, 1987). Additionally, research does not always distinguish the difference between the type of provision, the frequency, the proportion of a population involved or the setting (Kulik, 2003; Neihart, 2007; Slavin, 1987). Choosing to place gifted students in full-time selective classes can be controversial because of its association with some previous efforts at streaming and tracking and the adverse impact of this for lower ability groups within these provisions (Benbow & Stanley, 1996).

Discussions on ability grouping gifted students are further confused by several factors. There is a multitude of definitions for the term gifted, a wide choice of alternative provisions, variation in each provision and inconsistency in research findings. Allan (1991) compared the meta-analyses and synthesised research on ability grouping published by Slavin (1987) and Kulik and Kulik (1982). He found that even though these were only published five years apart they contradicted each other on many points. Allan warned that there “has been a great deal of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the research. Educators need to be critical consumers” (Allan, 1991, p. 64). This statement was supported by Litster and Roberts (2011) who meta-analysed 40 studies on self-concept and perceived competencies of GATE students and found that results varied, often based on factors such as the year of publication and the age of the participants.

The contradictory nature of the research results reported in the literature highlight that there is no one best way to reach the goal of providing for gifted students, either in the short or the long term, with each provision having its pros and cons (Delcourt, Cornell, &
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Goldberg, 2007). In 2007, Rogers synthesised all research related to the education of gifted and talented students available at that time, and concluded that the most important lesson for administrators and educators was that:

There is no single practice or panacea that will work in every school setting and with every gifted or talented learner... It is completely up to the school to select those that will work best with its current philosophy, staff, and school community. (p.382)

In line with this thinking, the Department of Education Western Australia (2011) acknowledges that “approximately 10% of the population will be identified for gifted and talented provisions” (p.3) and that “schools may develop strategies, which allow the most able students to learn together” (p. 9). Further, Becker et al. (2014) argued that gifted education is a complex issue and must not be evaluated on one construct alone.

If Ability Grouping, Then Which Students?

One of the greatest difficulties in providing selective classes is student selection. For a provision to work, selection must be based on the gifts and talents students possess that will potentially benefit from the type of program a school offers. Some students with significant potential are difficult to identify as they may mask their gifts and others may not have had the opportunity to develop their gifts into talents due to a lack of opportunity or task commitment issues (Ablard, 1997; Silverman, 2013). Even though the school in the current study bases its program, selection criteria and philosophies (Appendices A & B) on the policy of the Department of Education, WA, the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) coordinator also acknowledges that other ideas strongly influence the identification criteria. These include Tannenbaum’s idea that giftedness can be seen through the talent to produce something new, or the demonstration of skill proficiency, task commitment and creativity
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(Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2016b; Gross, 2005). At Pondview, identification guidelines look for students who show potential or academic talent, general intelligence or problem-solving abilities. At times, students are selected for their verbal acuity that indicates deep understanding or unique perspectives, even if they lack general task commitment. These guidelines allow for placement of underachieving students with a trained, gifted educator, in an environment and with peers that may encourage them to develop academic motivation and realise their talent(s).

Gallagher (2003) sees academically gifted students as more than a warehouse of information but as efficient users of the meta-thinking skills necessary to network the interrelationships and interconnected knowledge structures that make up knowledge and understanding. Feldman (2003) found in a version of Sternberg’s Triarchic Theory that giftedness is the use of executive control processes manifesting as dimensions of academic, practical, and creative talents. Using this theory, if giftedness is related to the executive control process, there is an implication that students with a natural ability, for example, in mathematics, may also be able to use their meta-thinking skills to advance beyond their peers in language learning areas, given the right learning environment and role models. Matthews and Dai (2014) conceptualised giftedness as “a dynamic, domain-specific and socially mediated process, resulting from the complex interactions of disposition, aptitudes and social–cultural environment, leading to diverse pathways and outcomes” (p. 347).

Giftedness in one academic area is not understood to mean that students may also be gifted in any other aspect of their development. Gifted students regularly demonstrate asynchronous development (Lee, 1999; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Thomson, 2012). Broadening the criteria for acceptance into academically selective classes to those students who show academic potential in any domain and would also enjoy or benefit from being
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included in the type of program allows for a wider range of students with gifts to be catered for. Lack of advanced skills in other learning areas should not be a barrier to having legitimate and fulfilling experiences in the area of their giftedness and potential talent. Selection needs to be extended to ensure social development is not considered an obstacle to obtaining enrichment. Behaviour issues, along with social development is not a reason to exclude gifted students from advanced classes as some teachers suggest (Geake & Gross, 2008).

Selection strategies also need to be reflective of a school’s community by taking account of the socio-economic, cultural and gender mix of the school in selecting students to an ability class. A criticism of ability grouping is that the selection procedures regularly miss underachieving gifted students who are often members of lower socio-economic and ethnic minority groups, and hence they do not represent the social diversity of society (Australian Parliament Senate, 2001; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011). Neihart (2007) believes that any discussion on ability grouping needs to address unequal opportunities created for any culture, gender, or social group. The school of the current study uses a broad range of identification methods and checks gender and cultural balances of its program participants against that of the school population to ensure equity of participation.

Academic selective classes may not be suitable for all gifted students. Chessor and Whitton (2005, p. 99) asked twenty-one Australian parents if they were given the choice again, would they accept a place in an Opportunity Class for their child; 52% said yes, 24% no and 19% were uncertain with 5% (one parent) not wanting to answer. Matthews and Kitchen (2007) also asked a similar question of 530 students in public American gifted school programs and found 77% - 90% of students would recommend their gifted program to others. Key factors in the negative responses were the travelling time, peers or missing
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former social groups due to moving schools, pressure and the teacher’s instructional style in
the program could be improved through reduced workloads, reduced expectations, and more
creative and flexible teaching. To ensure Opportunity Classes and gifted programs are able
to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students, issues of pressure, isolations
and teaching styles need to be carefully thought through and addressed.

The Right Teacher for an Academic Ability Class

With so many factors affecting the success or failure of students in an ability class,
the experience must be monitored and delivered by a teacher who understands gifted
students and their learning needs (Vidergor & Azar, 2015). Parents and students also believe
that a teacher of gifted students must be competent in teaching at the academic level of the
students, understand how gifted students learn, be invested in students’ success as well as
emotionally intelligent enough to respond to student needs (Rosemarin, 2014; Samardzija &
Peterson, 2015).

Within the classroom, the teacher must be comfortable in allowing students to learn
according to their own learning styles, be innovative in the way curriculum is delivered, and
create a child-centered learning environment (Rosemarin, 2014; Vidergor & Azar, 2015;
Vidergor & Eilam, 2012). Teachers of mixed-ability classes are not often trained (McCann,
2005) to provide instruction in a way that accounts for the different learning styles and pace
of learning of gifted students or how to use critical thinking skills (Reis, 2003). There needs
to be “compatibility between teaching methods and student preferences” (Vidergor & Azar,
2015, p. 160) for GATE programs to be effective. Gifted students have reported often
preferring to work on topics of personal interest or in groups that are interactive and
responsive (Samardzija & Peterson, 2015; Vidergor & Azar, 2015).
Academic Challenge

In a review of current gifted education practices in South Australia, Jarvis and Henderson (2015) found teachers reported that they offered challenges in the mixed-ability class, but results from this study found students and parents did not always share this view. Further, the review found that an appropriate level of challenge ought to be available through differentiation in a heterogeneous class, but that repeated studies have found gifted students experience ongoing frustration and boredom in these class structures (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Gagné, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2010). Earlier studies by Westberg et al. as cited in Benbow and Stanley (1996) found that during 84% of instructional time, no instructional or curricular differentiation occurred for identified gifted students in heterogeneous classrooms, supporting students’ claims that differentiation is missing. Unfortunately, in a mixed-ability classroom where teaching to the middle (average) (Riley, 2001) and giving the most support to those who struggle is the norm, the development of gifted students becomes a part-time pursuit (Bernal, 2003). Jarvis and Henderson (2015) found that for many teachers, offering differentiation for students with gifts is more often a desire than a reality and exacerbated by a lack of training in gifted education.

As students mature, their level of motivation to achieve becomes more stable, so it is important that the motivation to learn be encouraged early (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001) this can be made possible through catering for students’ interests, providing appropriate levels of academic challenge and ensuring students achieve successes. Students are rarely motivated when they sit through lessons about concepts they already understand, discussing topics they have outgrown with people that only have a basic understanding of what is being discussed. This occurs far too often for students who are gifted (Gagné, 2007).
Gifted students often find that they have limited reasons to listen in mixed-ability classes unless they like finding every opportunity to show how much they know (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). Those students who do not show off with their ability sometimes hide their ability to fit in socially (Adams-Byers et al., 2004) and quietly occupy themselves while waiting for the class to catch up (Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015). When these experiences become the norm, they can have negative social and emotional impact on the student (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). The mixed-ability classroom can lead to ongoing underachievement, hiding of abilities and wasted opportunities (Gates, 2010; Reis, 2003; Vinson, Esson, Johnston, & N.S.W. Teachers' Federation., 2002). School underachievement can lead to lifelong underachievement.

Academically selective classes offer opportunities to learn in ways that are not possible in a mixed-ability class. Through their makeup and design, academically selected classes are better placed than mixed-ability classes, to address gifted students needs and their desire to work on appropriately difficult challenges (Delcourt et al., 2007; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). These classes can offer a culture of achievement that is not always possible in the regular classroom (Vidergor & Azar, 2015) and keep students engaged and learning. In a comparison study of forty elementary school students in Turkey, Ogurlu (2016) found that ability classes offered more opportunities for robust discussions that may be more appropriate for the way gifted students learn and think.

Full-time ability classes and differentiation of the curriculum can increase motivation, resilience and reduce boredom by condensing the school curricula. Stoeger, Steinbach, Obergriesser, and Matthes (2014) found that there is a possibility that at a young age the learning environment may have a more transforming effect than individual
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achievement than later on; therefore, it is important to offer appropriate learning environments early. Providing an environment that facilitates optimal student learning will ensure learning occurs all year round. Full-time ability classes can condense the curriculum more easily, creating opportunities for students to consistently engage with the curriculum at a point that is challenging, alongside peers who will also expand on their thinking. In an academically selected class, the work is at a faster pace and is at a challenging level from the beginning of the year.

Increasing performance expectations, perseverance and the opportunity to refine time management skills (Coleman et al., 2015; Vidergor & Azar, 2015) increases student motivation and is a stabiliser for achievement and healthy self-concept (Chessor & Whitton, 2007). Within an academically selected class, students need to focus on keeping up; and they learn to listen because they are challenged and interested and often respect the opinions of their peers or at least their abilities. Kanevsky (2011) found that due to the pace and complex way gifted students think, they find it more motivating to work with peers who think and work at a similar level on appropriately levelled material. Also as class work becomes harder and no longer easy enough to be completed at the last minute, the skills of resilience and persistence can develop (Gyarmathy, 2013; Reis, 2003). Working at an appropriate level of challenge gives students an understanding that achievement and effort are not mutually exclusive (Chessor & Whitton, 2007).

In a study by Vidergor and Azar (2015) of a self-contained elementary classroom for the gifted students, many of the twenty students interviewed felt that developing curiosity and interest was the goal of their time in the academic select class. They found that students were more likely to “receive encouragement, stimulus, and expression of their abilities” (Vidergor & Azar, 2015, p. 160) in this type of class. A student in Vidergor and Azar’s
study explained that she saw learning in the general education class as having a focus on understanding and in her academic ability class as “in-depth learning, understanding, and analysis” (2015, p. 159). Curricular differentiation is more likely to happen and be effective when high achieving students are grouped together, with a teacher trained in gifted education (Gentry and MacDougal, as cited in Brulles, Saunders, & Cohn, 2010). Students in selected class or cluster groups are also more aware of their thinking processes and abilities (Bacal, 2015) and maintain an “interest in school over time, whereas, in regular classes, interest in school decreased” (Vogl & Preckel, 2014, p. 62).

Social and Emotional Challenges

The arguments for and against full-time academic classes has often been linked with gifted students’ academic self-concept, general self-concept, and their self-esteem (Chessor & Whitton, 2007; Vialle, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2015; Vogl & Preckel, 2014). Literature that links self-concept and self-esteem with gifted education can be divided into two broad categories; those that look for inherent differences between gifted students and non-gifted students and, those that aim to determine what experiences, such as types of schooling or grouping, affect a student’s levels of self-esteem or self-concepts. As self-esteem and self-concept are considered closely related, they are often confused (Vialle et al., 2015, p. 18) and therefore they need to be clearly identified. Also, not always clearly defined are the differences between self-concept, academic self-concept, and specific learning area self-concepts. It is important to distinguish between these as each has a different role and affects students in different ways.

Self-concept is a form of self-knowledge (Pajares & Schunk, 2001) and can be thought of as a snapshot of what a student thinks and feels about themself as a person. Self-concept can relate to social, emotional, or academic aspects of ability. Academic self-
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Concept can involve external comparisons with others or an internal comparisons with what they expected from themselves (Sousa, 2009). Academic satisfaction and development and social and emotional health play a role in a student’s general self-concept (Adams-Byers et al., 2004). “A poor self-concept can hinder or prevent choices that lead to the full accomplishment of potential” (Rudasill & Callahan, 2008, p. 71) especially if it evolves into poor self-esteem.

Self-esteem is considered to be the “evaluative component of self-concept” (Pajares & Schunk, 2001, p. 244) Academic self-esteem is focussed on how students feel about their strengths or weaknesses in specific learning areas (Vialle et al., 2015). Although high “self-esteem is positively associated with academic outcomes in the theory that underpins most gifted provision in Australian schools” (Vialle et al., 2015, p. 19), Vialle et al. (2015) found in a study of 65 gifted students from a sample of over 900 Australian high school students that there was “no correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement for the gifted group” evident (p.17).

A poor social self-concept itself is often not found to be an issue for primary school students, including mildly and moderately gifted students as these students demonstrate equal physical, self-concept, social skills and acceptance as their peers (Ablard, 1997; Bain & Bell, 2004; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995; Rimm, 2002; Rudasill & Callahan, 2008). Although there is a possibility of developing poor self-concept, most gifted students in primary schools have reported feeling socially accepted and to hold positive self-concepts (Lee et al., 2012; Rimm, 2002). They mostly have well-developed social and emotional skills (Bacal, 2015; França-Freitas, Del Prette, & Del Prette, 2014) and are socially content in any class arrangement (Delcourt et al., 2007). Issues with self-concept have been found to be more common in adolescence, but the framework on
When placed with academic peers a big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) can occur (Marsh et al., 1995). Essentially the BFLPE is a decline in a student’s academic self-concept and is thought to occur because a student feels very confident in their abilities when they are the big fish, the one who knows the most, amongst a small group of peers. This feeling is replaced when they begin learning with many other talented big fish because of comparisons they make; they evaluate their abilities to be less than they previously thought. Students may lose their belief in the level of their ability. BFLPE in high ability schools and classes has been shown to be a very robust concept (Seaton, Marsh, Yeung, & Craven, 2011). Students experiencing this phenomenon initially experience an assimilation effect, a positive reaction to being selected for these classes (Vidergor & Azar, 2015; Vinson et al., 2002). They initially make academic gains, but then their academic self-concept reduces (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Australian Parliament Senate, 2001; Chessor & Whitton, 2007; Delcourt et al., 2007). Marsh et al. (1995) found that this phenomenon is “consistent over gender, age, and initial ability level” (p. 285). They also outlined six strategies that may be effective in counteracting the BFLPE and therefore maximise the benefits of GATE programs. These are to (a) broaden selection criteria to include non-standardised testing, (b) reduce competitiveness in the environment, (c) include topics of personal interest to the students, (d) provide student feedback on personal improvement, (e) value each student’s achievements, and (f) select teachers who are GATE trained (Marsh et al., 1995, p. 315).

Gross (1997) argued that the comparison reported by gifted students might not be aimed at others but themselves. As part of their talent development, many students chosen for selective ability classes have worked hard, shown task commitment, and possibly set very high standards for themselves. A decline in academic self-concept may not be BFLPE
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as measured against other students but a comparison against what they expect for themselves. Students are likely to develop a clear understanding of their ability at some point. Gross in Henshon (2007) asks if students do not become exposed to how well others can reason or perform academically while at school, then when? Either way, an adjustment may just be a reality check against the range of abilities in the larger world. If done with care and using the guidelines given by (Marsh et al., 1995), a teacher trained in gifted education may be able to offer a healthy academic self-concept adjustment in a full-time academic class.

If it is a more realistic view of their actual talent that they gain in selective classes, then it is the role of the teachers to teach them how to cope with this, without losing the desire to be challenged. Vidergor and Azar (2015) found that the assimilation effects in relation to mathematics compensated for the BFLPE if measured before grades were given, suggesting that pedagogical intervention could extend this effect. To address the BFLPE, teachers must be trained on effective early interventions (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Preckel, Franzis, Thomas, & Anne, 2010).

Another concern about selective ability classes for students who are gifted is that selected students could become conceited (Australian Parliament Senate, 2001). If this behaviour is based on a belief of academic superiority, it is feasible that the BFLPE may counter this with a more realistic view of their ability (Benbow & Stanley, 1996) once they are able to compare themselves to other students with gifts. A student’s elevated beliefs about their ability can develop as a result of being continuously told how smart they are while in the mixed-ability class or after being confirmed as gifted through selection into an academic ability class (Vidergor & Azar, 2015). Superiority may have implications for friendships as in Gallagher’s (2015) study the few students with gifts who were considered
Gifted students vary in their social abilities and feel the same pressure to fit in as all other students (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002). Full-time ability classes have a minimal difference or “actual reduction in heterogeneity” when compared with a mixed-ability class (Slavin, 1987, p. 322). However, some educators deny special provisions for gifted students because they believe these students do not fit in socially and need time with non-gifted students as a way of learning to interact with a range of peers (Vogl & Preckel, 2014). Seventy-five percent of the 44 Year 5-11 gifted American students interviewed by Adams-Byers et al. (2004) “perceived mixed-ability grouping to offer the greatest number of social/emotional advantages” (p.10), because of their social diversity. Gallagher (2015) asked students in a mid-western community to list their five closest friends and found that 52% of students predetermined to be highly gifted where placed in the top 25% of liked students. The research establishes no clear “pattern of improvement or decline” (Rogers, 2002, p. 106) in respect to socialisation and psychological effects of grouping on ability and that self-esteem and socialisation are affected more directly by other factors outside of the school’s control than ability grouping. Ablard (1997) did find that gifted adolescent students did experience poor peer relationships that were ultimately balanced by solid teacher and family relationships.

Despite their social abilities, some students who are gifted may fail to find close friends or deep connection in mixed-ability grouping due to a lack of peers at the same social level or with similar interests. The desire to have friends has resulted in some gifted students in mixed-ability classes succumbing to a forced-choice dilemma; feeling a need to decide between revealing their academic ability and being liked by their peers (Gross in Porter, 2005; Riley, 2001) – with many choosing social acceptance (Gross in Henshon,
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2007, p. 81). This has led to academic underachievement (Ablard, 1997; Australian Parliament Senate, 2001). Gross describes the force-choice dilemma as a “conflict between their need to achieve and their need for intimacy” (p. 82). Bain and Bell (2004) found students in primary school are less likely to experience the same pressure to succumb to a forced-choice dilemma as older students.

Sometimes academic ability classes are where gifted students meet close friends and feel a sense of belonging for the first time (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2002; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). In these classes, they can develop a feeling of being accepted, understood and even average and normal (Riley & White, 2016; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). These classes give students the chance to discuss with their peers their differences and similarities and assists them with the tools to understand that their giftedness or talent is only one part of them. Students should not expect to be gifted but be themselves with a gift (Gates, 2010).

Full-time ability classes can be stressful places for participants, but they can also be a place where students feel they can safely be themselves Adams-Byers et al. (2004). Once accepted into the classes, some students reported developing higher expectations for themselves and feeling that their teachers and parents did also (Guskin, Okolo, Zimmerman, & Peng, 1986; Moulton, Moulton, Housewright, & Bailey, 1998). In the three elementary schools researched by Eddles-Hirsch et al. (2010), the increased level of expectation stress was added to by in-class high-performance criteria and a lack of time to complete tasks, but these reasons were not enough for students to want to give up the option of being in a selective ability class.

Once students are grouped on a common factor such as academic ability, they are
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often labelled, and their other qualities are marginalised. Labelling a group of gifted students can give the impression that they are all the same (Gates, 2010). When students with gifts are labelled as gifted, they are often seen only for their advanced abilities while variations in strengths and weaknesses are often missed. Areas in which they struggle can be ignored at the “expense of the child” (Gates, 2010, p. 204).

Berlin (2009) noted the more gifted a student was, as determined by the school psychologist’s testing, the more they seemed comfortable with the label of gifted, with less gifted students preferring the label of bright. Parents of some gifted students have shown a reluctance to use the label gifted as they perceive that it can create social damage and segregation (Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannatter, 2010; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). Students also have mixed feelings about being labelled gifted (Ablard, 1997; Matthews, Ritchotte, & Jolly, 2014).

Some gifted students have reported that they believe it is okay to be smart when they perceive teachers and other students are attributing their abilities to hard work, rather than innate ability (Berlin, 2009; Guskin et al., 1986). This feeling of acceptance is extended when the culture of the school is supportive of the students, with social and emotional support structures in place (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010). In a study by Gallagher et al. (2010), 70-85% of over 800 students ranging in age from elementary to high school age answered in the affirmative to “is it ok to be smart in this school?” (p. 135). Research by both Berlin (2009) and Guskin et al. (1986) showed that gifted students often felt they were not treated differently, except for a higher level of expectations from themselves, teachers and their parents.
Teachers in the wider school community are not always as supportive of students with gifts as the student perceives. Geake and Gross (2008) found that in a study of 377 teachers in three countries, undergoing professional development in gifted education, subconsciously had negative feelings toward academically gifted children, labelling them as social misfits or not belonging. Making gifted students part of the whole school community, integrating selective class students with the rest of the cohort during sports, art and break times can remove some stereotyping (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Berlin, 2009). Matthews and Kitchen (2007) found that when ability classes for gifted students are physically isolated away from the rest of the school and students are involved in different activities, other students perceive “that gifted students are granted extra privileges” (p. 268).

The literature on full-time academic ability classes for moderately and mildly gifted students is sparse, especially for primary school aged students. The studies available show that full-time academic classes are often reserved for older students and those with higher levels of giftedness as determined by IQ or standardised testing. This restriction leaves less talented, yet still gifted students in the mixed-ability classroom where a moderated curriculum is thought to be able to meet their needs (Silverman, 2013). Academically focused classes have been shown to have detrimental effects on some student’s academic and personal self-confidence (Chessor & Whitton, 2007; Guskin et al., 1986; Seaton et al., 2011) and this may be a reason to restrict their use. These findings are contradicted by other research showing students with gifts regularly miss having their academic and social-emotional needs met in mixed-ability classrooms (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Benbow & Stanley, 1996; Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Gallagher et al., 2010). The literature has also demonstrated that academic challenge and social-emotional support can be found in full-time academic select classes (Delcourt et al., 2007; Vidergor & Azar, 2015).
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The contradictory findings in the literature make it difficult for educators to confidently determine the GATE provision they should offer at their school. The absence of documentation related to the approximate 8% of students who are moderately and mildly gifted makes this task even harder. Becker et al. (2014) viewed gifted education as a complex issue that must not be evaluated on one construct alone. For this reason, Pondview Primary School has sought to have its full-time academic program explored in a multi-faceted way through the voices of those most affected by it, the students and their parents. This research asks participants what the overall effect of being in the *Opportunity Class* program had on them.
Chapter 3: Methodology

A qualitative approach is the basis for the methodology used in this study.

Qualitative research, through an interpretive perspective, makes an understanding of the whole experience of being in an Opportunity Class possible. This method “make(s) the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3) as it allows the study of complex and dynamic issues, such as gifted education, from a personal history perspective.

This chapter begins with a restatement of the research problem and question that guide this study. It explains the research paradigm, methodology and methods chosen as well as participant selection. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations of the study.

Guiding Research Question:

This study examines a GATE program run by one primary school in Western Australia from the perspectives of students and parents. It seeks to understand the effects of the program on its participants, to understand better how the program met or did not meet the needs of its identified gifted population. It is designed to establish whether students and their families believe the Opportunity Class program provided an environment that was supportive and beneficial to the students in the short and long term.

Guiding Research Question:

What do students and parents perceive are the effects of participating in the school’s full-time academic selective program on the student’s academic performance and their social and emotional wellbeing?
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Three underpinning research sub-questions were developed to support the guiding research question:

a) How are students selected and who should teach the program?

b) What other gifted provisions have previously been experienced by participants?

c) What are the programs academic, social, and emotional effects on students, especially in relation to the literature on gifted education?

Research Paradigm

This research will identify the benefits and constraints of selective ability classes as perceived by students and parents. Gifted Education is a value-laden concept (Dai & Chen, 2013) and as perception is “the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted” (Oxford English Dictionary online, 2014) an Interpretive Constructivist paradigm is adopted for this study. “The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings” of their social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 24). As people bring their histories to their understanding and interpret their reality through their “subjective perception of their environment – their subjective realities” (Willis & Jost, 2007, p. 6) to understand what they experience is important to ask them.

Grounded within the Interpretive Constructivist paradigm is a sociocultural approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach supports the study of gifted students, within the context of a school, as their reality is the way they perceive and recall their experiences. “Everyday realities are actively constructed in and through forms of social
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action” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011, p. 341). The dynamics and complexity of the sociocultural approach help to deepen understandings about how pedagogy and educational reform can constrain and distort the experiences of its participants. A “qualitative researcher can also create spaces for those who are studied (the other) to speak” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 15). It allows the individual to express how the context influences thoughts and feelings and how these changed over time.

The Melbourne Declaration for Education affirmed that a role of schools is to assist students to become confident and creative individuals, learners as well as academically successful (2008, p. 7). Bernal (2003) in his Growing Giftedness Model also saw the role of gifted education as reaching beyond academics into that of helping students to develop the personal qualities they will need as gifted adults. The fundamental reasons for the program design and implementation at this school were to cater in a holistic way for gifted students. During its implementation, the program evolved in different iterations; responding to changing school and student needs. This dynamic program, therefore, is explored qualitatively.

Methods

The two specific methods used in this study are in-depth interviews with students and focus group discussions with parents. Focus groups were chosen as they are “efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of material from relatively large numbers of people in a relatively short time… often reveal(ing) unarticulated norms and normative assumptions” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 397). Individual in-depth interviews were used with students as they also allowed the researcher to “reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible such as a people’s subjective experiences and attitudes” (Peräkylä, 2011, p. 529). Guiding questions asked by the researcher during interviews and
focus groups are selected as the most appropriate tools to answer the question as to participant perceptions. They offer opportunities to probe, ask for clarification and elaboration. They give the freedom to explore new understandings and issues as they arise. With the researcher, also being a classroom practitioner, data gathered at the time of interviews has the benefit of being viewed through a day-to-day understanding of someone who has shared the same events (Campbell, 2013). The common language shared by both can help the researcher reframe questions or ask probing ones that can help interpret any discrepancies. Sample questions used in the interviews with students and in the focus groups are provided in appendix E and F.

Participant Selection

The research site was a large urban, government primary school, in Western Australia. The school’s student population had grown rapidly as it services a major residential development that is still growing. The current EAL (English as an Additional Language) migrant population is currently recorded at 32% of total students (2016) and is expected to increase.

Participants in the study were either a parent of a student who had been in the Opportunity Class program or the student. Student participants were selected from those who had been in the “Opportunity Class” program, but, who have not been students of the researcher. Of the 118 students who have participated in the program since its inception, 80 students have been students of the researcher and therefore are excluded from the student target population and not available to be interviewed. This exclusion is required due to all students still being under 14 years of age and the possible effect that a previous teacher/student relationship could have on student answers. This left thirty-eight eligible student participants. Parent participation was open to any parent or guardian of a student
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who had been in the program, with invitation letters been addressed to the contact person on the school database. Due to 26 students being siblings, 105 parent representatives were invited to participate in the focus group discussions.

To ensure participants felt free to accept or reject the invitation, all participants were identified and then contacted by the school via letter. Letters were sent to potential participant’s last known address and included information about the research and consent forms. Informed consent letters were written to ensure potential participants understood the purpose of the study, any foreseeable risks, and an invitation that was not coercive (Walter, 2010). Student letters were addressed to parents and consent to participate required a signed parent consent as well as signed student consent form.

Response

After a two-week period, all respondents were contacted to arrange an interview and focus group times. Twenty-nine parents initially returned consent forms expressing their interest in participating in the research. Due to timetabling of focus groups, 24 parents or 23% of the qualifying parent population did participate in one of the four focus group discussions. Of the 38 students invited, eleven responded and were individually interviewed. Three of the interviewed students had a parent who also participated in this study. All self-selected participants who could attend during the data collection phase were interviewed.

The Respondents

The cultural mix of the participants is reflective of the school’s student intake area. The local area data used for this study was obtained from Census Data published by Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) and includes the school intake area plus an older,
more established adjacent suburb with less new migration. The school data were collected in 2015, and due to a rapidly growing new housing estate, the cultural mix of the area may have experienced changes. The census data showed that 66% of the community were born in Australia with 55-57% of participants in this study identifying themselves as Australian. The biggest cultural variations were found with participants identifying as having an Asian cultural background. The census data identified 11.1% of residents to be Asian in 2011 while 45% of all students and 26% of parent participants identified their culture background as Asian for the purpose of this study. A more detailed comparison is given in Appendix G.

Student participants were aged from 10 to 14 years old; ten were female, and one was male. The male student was new to the program and had been participating for six months. English was not spoken in the family home of two students, and two others had bilingual homes. Three students interviewed had siblings who also participate in the program, and three had siblings that may join the program in the future. At the time of the interviews, most of the student participants were attending high schools in a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program or Academic Excellence Program (AEP).

Twenty-four parents participated in focus group discussions. All parents completed the parent background survey as they arrived for the focus group session, except one parent who arrived late and needed to leave immediately afterwards. Of those received, 78% of participants were female. 57% identified themselves as Australian, 25% as Asian, 13% as European and one Canadian. Education levels of parents were distributed between High School and postgraduate degrees. They were higher than the area statistics with 72% of parents having post-school qualifications.
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Two-thirds of the parents interviewed still had children at the primary school. Five parents or 22% have had two children participate in the program and could give their opinion based on the effect of the classes on both children. Eight parents still had children who may be selected for the program in the future. Two had children in regular high school classes, and six parents had students in GATE or AEP programs.

Interview Question

The literature review revealed that there are many conflicting views on how to successfully cater for gifted primary school students. Since full-time ability classes are the model on which the school provided for its gifted students and is the model been researched, it was necessary to develop questions that asked what effect this provision had on students.

Using the problem statements of a) how best to cater for the needs of gifted students and b) is full-time ability grouping an effective and successful means of doing so; the guiding research question was generated. Within this overarching question were three research sub-questions that were expanded and became the seven interview questions asked of participants. These questions were designed to establish a picture of the program. Question 1 asked how the school selected it program participants. Questions 2, 3 & 4 explored the effects of this provision as a means of meeting the needs of gifted students. Question 5 sought opinions about how this program compared to other provisions experienced. Question 6 was designed as a way of seeking solutions to any program constraints and to provide guidance on how to develop the program further. Question 7 was a concluding question designed to check previous answers and sum up responses. The seven interview questions were written as semi-structured interview questions and focus group discussion prompts. This format allowed for participants to share any additional perceptions they had and enabled the researcher to seek clarification or elaboration if necessary.
Data Collection

Four focus group discussions were held at the school, and each group had between 4-8 participants. Before the sessions began, participants were asked to return completed consent forms and fill in a background survey (Appendix C). They were then asked a series of interview questions Appendix (E). Focus groups were audio-recorded for later transcribing.

Data collected from each participant was not equal with some having more input than others, however it did provide a range of opinions on some areas of discussion and a method of locating trends and common views. As a method of data collection, multiple data groups allows for collection of data, in a more natural environment, that shows “trends and patterns in perceptions” (Krueger, 2014, p. 2).

Students were interviewed individually at the school unless parents requested student interviews to take place at their homes. Students were asked to complete a background survey (Appendix D) similar to the parents’ survey. They were then asked a series of interview questions (Appendix F), and some follow-up questions that arose during the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded for later transcribing and allowed for the researcher to remain focused on the interviewee (Walter, 2010, p. 308). Approximately 14 hours of interview data were recorded.

Research by semi-structured interviews using the same questions allowed for data to be collected in more detail. Data source triangulation was then used to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives and validation of data (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). In this study, parents were mostly observers of the program as it was
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reflected in their children’s attitudes and behaviours, whilst students were the primary participants. From these differing points of views, possible values and ability to remember events, a common or complimentary perception of the program was gathered.

Coding

Data analysis was carried out in several steps that were revisited multiple times until it was felt each piece of information was accounted for, concepts identified and categories fully emerged. The process was guided by the six-step process outlined by (Lichtman, 2012, p. 265) which includes the ongoing revisiting of codes, additional rereading to modify categories and the moving from categories to concepts. The steps listed by Lichtman (2012) are:

1. Initial coding,
2. Revisiting initial coding,
3. Developing an initial list of categories or central ideas,
4. Modifying rereading,
5. Revisiting categories and subcategories and subcategories, and
6. Moving from coding to concept development.

The coding process began with the transcription of all data by the researcher to ensure it was understood and to assist the researcher in recalling what each of the 35 participants had said. During the transcribing process, each response was uniquely labelled with an alphanumeric permutation, and this became its statement code. The statement code was used as it supported quote retrieval and the tracking of each participant’s views without exposing the identity of the participant. Once all data were transcribed and marked with statement codes, it was analysed for common categories and central ideas. With the same questions guiding both individual interviews and focus groups, most of the responses could be linked
to a question. New categories were created as the open-ended interview technique fostered
discussions that ultimately raised some new ideas and significant issues. Each category was
then colour coded. Responses that crossed over into more than one category were included in
both. New categories were created to ensure the inclusion of all relevant data.

Once placed in a category, data within each group were further divided into the
subcategories reflecting the participant responses as being for the program, against the
program and recommendations for the future of the program. These were coded again to
indicate links to both the primary category and the subcategory. Grouping of responses into
question categories and then into for, against and recommendations allowed for the analysis
of any conflicting statements or modifications of opinions from the same participant. Once
categories were set, responses from individual interviews and focus group discussions were
then merged so comparisons between parent and students’ views could be compared. Data
were again coded to identify common threads and establish concepts.

As data were analysed, themes began to emerge. Within each category, the
importance of academic learning and social and emotional issues became strong themes
emerging from the data. An attempt was then made to separate responses into those that
described social or emotional effects and those linked to academic success or challenges. I
anticipated that in doing this I would have been able to answer the initial guiding research
question about the academic and social effects of this program, but it became evident that
they were highly dependent on each other and could not adequately be handled separately.
The key themes that did underlie participants’ responses were acceptance, challenge,
belonging and low key.
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The research has been reported under the headings that are important to an understanding of the program and the results for all audiences, including school and teachers. Within the results are references to the themes found and their potential significance.

Ethical Considerations

Four points of ethics were taken into account. These included the potential for uneven power relationships between a teacher and their pupils, coercion to participate, informed consent and means to ensure confidentiality.

A teacher holds a position of power in the relationship with students, both past and current. To ensure the legitimacy of responses, it was deemed as appropriate for students whom the researcher had directly taught to be excluded from the target population and therefore the research. To a lesser degree, relationships may also exist between a teacher and a parent. Consequently, to guarantee no coercion to participate was felt by students or parents, the school took on the role of a third party (Habibis, 2010). In its role, the school disseminated information letters and consent forms to all potential participants, therefore removing the researcher from the initial recruitment phase.

As students are considered a vulnerable population (Habibis, 2010) all student invitations were sent addressed to the student’s parent or guardian and required the consent form to be signed by both the student and their guardian. Co-signed consent forms were used to ensure that parents/guardians were aware of the purpose of the study and both wanted the student to participate.
Confidentiality and accurate recording of responses are often fundamental to ensuring accurate and full disclosure. The focus group arrangement cannot guarantee that all a participant says will remain confidential, but a request for this to happen was made at the beginning of each discussion. To ensure data were recorded accurately, audio recordings were made of each session. When sessions were transcribed, all information identifying participants was removed. Data are stored on a password-protected computer, and hard copies are kept in a locked cabinet.
Chapter 4: Results

This study investigates one primary school’s solution to catering for its gifted students. It seeks to identify the benefits and constraints of the Opportunity Class program as experienced by the students and their parents/guardians. The purpose of this investigation is to understand the benefits and challenges of such a class and offer insights for policy makers and providers of gifted education. Guided by the research questions the experiences of participants, as they related to the Opportunity Class, were analysed to identify the benefits and constraints of the program.

The results are reported under headings related to the guiding research question of *What do students and parents perceive as the effects of being in the school’s full-time academic selective program on student’s academic performance and their social and emotional wellbeing?* This research question was supported by three underlying questions:

(a) *How are students selected and who should teach the program?* Responses to this question offer insights into the program’s selection process and incorporate perceptions on the approach, student nomination, final student selection and the qualities valued in a teacher of the program.

(b) *What other gifted provisions have previously been experienced by the participants?* Responses explore how participants viewed the mixed-ability class regarding meeting their academic and social, emotional needs.

(c) *What are the academic, social, and emotional effects on students of being in the program?* Responses address how the students felt being part of the program. It
directly addresses issues frequently raised in the literature such as BFLPE, labelling, forced-choice dilemma and stress.

Each question is reported as a section and is summarized with how it is connected to the emerged themes of acceptance, challenge, belonging and low key.

Each participant’s responses are coded using an alphanumeric system. As 11 students participated, each student response is indicated by the letter S followed by an allocated number from 1-11. Focus groups are either A, B, C or D and then individual parents are numbered within the group to distinguish among them.

### a. Selection

Parents valued what they describe as a *low-key* approach adopted by the school. They supported the school’s decision not to advertise the program to the public and to only mention the program to the wider school community once per year in the school newsletter.

Parent D2 was part of the parent committee who originally supported the principal when he initially proposed the program and remembered:

> When it started, there was a big push that it wasn’t going to be about separation, it wasn’t going to be about t-shirts and flashing lights – that’s what [principal’s name] used to say. So, I think by not making a big thing was the whole point, to not segregate the kids.

The way information about the program was disseminated was considered to be supportive of the school’s aim to have the program cater for its gifted student population.
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without singling out any group or students in a public way. B2 believed that telling or advertising to other students or parents that their children were tested for or accepted into the program would not be helpful. C1 expressed that it was enough to know that her child gained a place in the class and that their needs would be met. A1 and Parents in focus group D believed the current practices ensured the classes were fully integrated into the school and their children were catered for without becoming the centre of discussion. Parents expressed that this program needs to stay low key else: “It creates schoolyard discussion otherwise. It’s about the individual child; it is not about others” (C2). Parents of students selected received more detailed information at the beginning of the year welcome session.

Nominations

As described in the background information, student participation in the Opportunity Class program is for one year at a time. Therefore, students must requalify each year to continue to remain in the program. For the students in this study, many would have been renominated, tested, and reselected over several years. During discussions, it became apparent that participants did not know precisely the details of this process.

Students commonly presumed that their teachers nominated them while parents were less sure but believed teachers would play a major role in the process. Parents also considered that high stakes testing or grades could also be factors (A1, B4 and C1). One parent with a deeper understanding of the nomination process shared that her child’s teacher had called her in to discuss the Opportunity Class program before nominating her child for testing. The teacher shared that they were unsure if the child was ready socially and emotionally for the program at that point, and wanted to discuss it. The parent opted not to have the child nominated that year but acknowledged the integrity of the process noting that it was “really in-depth and involved and I like the way it covered everything, emotional, social. My
When students were asked to consider the idea of self or peer nomination for the program, students were not supportive of the notion. Four students suggested that there was too much potential bias in this option with one pointing out that the only students qualified to peer nominate would be those that have been in the program themselves as they understand what it takes to partake in the program. Parents were also against this type of nomination due to the age of students; feeling they were too young to make an informed decision.

The possibility of parents being able to nominate students to be tested was also not favoured by many students. Two students who did support the idea thought it could be useful in case the school missed someone (S7), and only if the teachers had the final choice (S8). Three students expressed they wanted parents kept totally out of the nomination process as they felt parents would be biased and their passion could even cause complications and fights (S3, S9 & S11).

The parent focus groups felt even more strongly about parents’ participation in the nomination process. They unanimously expressed that parents must not be involved at all. They saw it potentially causing increased levels of stress for everyone involved and a source of increased competition, gossip, and judgement. Members of focus group A felt that some parents may even feel obliged to ask for their child to be tested even if they did not believe it was the right class for them. They stated that the parent’s motivation could arise from wanting to save face by avoiding having to admit or say that their child was not smart enough to participate (A2).
Overall, participants advocated that students should be offered a place on their merit and it ought to be left to teachers to nominate and select, as they were the most qualified to understand how the students were at school.

**Testing**

Participants reflected on the testing that occurred to finalise selection. Testing took place in the student’s own class or two separate one hour sessions in an empty classroom. When discussing this in the interviews, most students felt that the short notice [less than a day] was positive as it prevented stress and worry. Parents in Group A, B and D, expressed the same idea. Regarding the content of the tests, some students found the tests more challenging than other students, but the consensus was that it was just like any other test they do throughout the year. All students thought the tests were fair and their results accurate. It was suggested by some students that the testing could have been more comprehensive and include in-class observations to see how students answered questions and interacted with others, as well as testing for higher order thinking skills and the ability to deliver a presentation.

Holding a belief that parents can be very competitive, even more than children, parents in Focus Group A believed that the testing must remain low key. They expanded by saying that they thought testing without notice prevented issues around parent competition by reducing the opportunity for parents to start asking others if their child was being tested. By knowing the testing date in advance, Parent A5 and Focus Group D felt that parents might start applying pressure to their children to do practice tests. Additionally, they felt it was easier to deal with the disappointment of not getting in if testing was low-key in the first place. This view was expressed by a parent B3 in focus group B:
I am a firm believer that I don’t think the parents should even know that kids are being tested for it [other parents expressed agreement at this point] they should have no involvement at all and they shouldn’t know until they get the letter in the mail saying that your kid has been accepted.

Parents did raise concerns about students who, historically, did not test well and the degree of reliance that was placed on high stakes testing (Parents D1 and A1). They shared that these factors had not been a personal concern as their children were in the program but they were curious about how it may affect other students.

**Student Selection**

Another question discussed in the interviews related to student selection and if the appropriate students are chosen for the program. Students described the typical program classmates as just normal students with both strengths and weaknesses. They thought they were selected for a variety of reasons but mostly because of their intelligence or ability to concentrate over an extended period. In the literature, students who are gifted are regularly referred to as the gifted denoting an emphasis on their ability as opposed to them as students first, with exceptional talents or potential. A few students mentioned that they thought that one or two students were not as academically talented as the others and probably should not have been in the class, largely since they had friends who were perceived to be brighter and who missed being offered a place.

To ascertain who the right students for the program are, one parent raised the point that it is important to understand the objectives of the program and she felt her understanding was limited to the fact that the class was for the more able students. Others felt that the purpose was to offer students that are more capable, the opportunity for extension among similar ability peers.
At the point of responding to this question, most parents agreed that the process selected suitable students but could not elaborate on what that meant or who the students were. Previously, parents had shared that it was positive to have a variety of abilities and personalities in the program (B3, C2). Parents were happy to have students included who were gifted but could not demonstrate it by traditional paperwork and tests. At least one parent from each focus group raised the point that despite the level of academic ability, it takes a certain amount of emotional readiness to thrive in the program due to the programs pace and curriculum flexibility. Parent D2 summed it up as some children “need more of the structure of the standard class”.

This desire to have variety in the class did not include student behaviour. As the class was designed to extend gifted and talented students, the question of what role behaviour and attitude ought to play in student selection was controversial. For students and parents who had experienced the program during years when highly disruptive students participated, their opinions were initially strong that disruptive students should not be in the program. They had experienced their own children’s daily feelings of frustration as misbehaviour by a select couple of students interrupted the learning and enjoyment of the whole class. Parents felt that the disruptive students ought to have been removed from the program. Three students who addressed behaviour in their interview thought that exhibiting poor behaviour should not restrict acceptance into the program but once in the class if the behaviour continues and subsequently disrupts others, then the disruptive student ought to lose their place. “If someone is disrupting the class then they shouldn’t stay in the class because of it sort of ruins everybody else’s learning” (S8). When asked to consider how their behaviour would affect a mixed-ability class, this student went on to explain that for this program “the purpose is to extend them, and the purpose is to give them that opportunity.” (S 8).
Parents in Focus Group C were more adamant that behaviour must be part of the selection process and Group D initially supported this stance. “In the Opportunity Class, there were certainly some students who were not opportunity kids. They mucked around and didn’t care and so on” (D1). Some parents acquiesced on this point, once they reflected on suggestions from other parents, that the behaviour could relate to a lack of challenge or to hide abilities from peers or that it may cease if not encouraged by other students.

All participants supported annual selection and reselection, even those that missed reselection (C4 and S2). Annual selection was considered as the fairest way to give all tested students the chance to be selected. It was perceived as allowing the school to evaluate the dynamics and participants in the program and ensure students’ needs were being met in the best possible way. As participant C2 noted:

The advantage with the school is because they do it yearly, even if they don’t remain with the class because it is a very collaborative school, their needs are still being addressed on an individual basis. Their needs are still being met, even if they’re not in an Opportunity Class. Something might happen like emotionally, and they’re not ready for that year, but it comes together, and they’re ready for it at the end of the next year. It gives those opportunities.

All focus groups noted that yearly testing opened possibilities for those students who tested poorly one year, were new to the school, lacked maturity or had only just begun to develop their gifts into recognised talents. Students new to the school with demonstrated abilities clearly above their peers are placed in the program without testing (S5 & S7) if a place in the class can be created.
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Student S2 was not reselected after one year in the program. She said the year in the Opportunity Class was the best she had in her entire primary schooling and it is where she met many of her friends. This student shared that in the year before the program, she felt academically superior to many of her peers and the year of the program she slowly began to feel inferior, as she could not keep up. She expressed that even if she were offered a place the following year, she would not have taken it, as it probably would have been too challenging.

Who Should Teach the Program?

Most of the participants believed that the teacher of the program ought to have some special qualities beyond that of other teachers. This belief was held more by parents than students. Three students felt that any teacher could teach the program. Five students described a sense of humour, being nice, understanding what they are teaching and being able to relate to the students, as necessary qualities of a teacher of gifted students. These qualities are desirable in teachers of any ability levels. Over half of the students expressed the view that the best fit for the program would be a teacher who had a firm grasp of what they were teaching, one who was involved in the class’ learning and could build relationships with students and extend them academically. When asked if anyone can teach the program S4 responded “I don’t know, but I think you have to have a certain understanding of the kids in the Opportunity Classes, if that makes sense. You need to understand that they need the extension and why they need it.” S4 went on to clarify that without the extension gifted students “They get bored, and you just don’t learn to the best of your ability… Also, I think you [the teacher] need to understand how to do it without overloading people” (S4).

Parents from focus groups B and D were clearly concerned with teacher’s understanding of this type of student, their idiosyncrasies, and their need for extension. Parents from all focus groups believed that the teacher needed a passion for teaching gifted
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and talented students. Further, they felt teachers need to be self-driven to take on the
challenge, preferably with a specific interest or qualification in gifted education. Parent B3
even suggested that the teachers ought to be a little different or unique themselves and
regularly think outside the box B3.

I would say that the teacher is the utmost important part. There is no point putting
any old teacher who doesn’t want to do this program into it, as it will be no benefit.
You need a teacher that can challenge the children in the way they need to be
challenged because that is why they made it into this program in the first place,
because they need that extra stimulation, and they need that different thinking, and if
you have a teacher that is not really prepared to do that, or have the ability to do
that, then you are wasting the program. The program won’t work the way it does
here. (B3)

In summary, parent participants thought if the students were different, to ensure a
genuine connection, it only made sense that their teacher also is special. “If we are saying that
these kids are a little bit more academic, a little bit more gifted or talented, then we probably
need a teacher who is that little bit more than every other teacher to deal with those kids”
(A2). A teacher who belongs with these types of students, who can challenge them and make
them feel accepted in the class and the school.

The process of selecting students, running the program and selecting teachers were
kept low key and understated, with very little information being disseminated. Participants
typically deferred to the expertise of those running the program, accepting that the school
would ultimately choose those students who belonged. Belonging was perceived to include
students would be able to meet and enjoy the challenge of the program. Very little reference
to the term gifted was used and could consider to almost be avoided. The acceptance of
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students who exhibited behaviour issues was the only real area of controversy. Students who did not gain reselection for the program accepted the decision but felt that they did not truly belong in either class type.

b. Other Gifted Provisions Previously Experienced by Participants

To understand the lens through which the students and parents view the program, it is important to appreciate their previous education experiences. For some students, it has been many years since they had last been part of a mixed-ability classroom and their recall was vague. However, they had memories and reactions that had remained with them. The responses relating to mixed-ability classrooms covers experiences in this school, other government schools, private and overseas schools that students have attended. Despite the many types of schools' students originated from and referred to in their interviews, there are a great number of similarities.

This section has further been divided into three parts. The first part covers participants responses to when curriculum differentiation or appropriate extension opportunities were not offered. The second, when differentiation was offered, what forms it took and responses to these opportunities. The third part was participants views on student social and emotional wellbeing whilst in the mixed ability class format.

Curriculum Differentiation and Extension Opportunities

For over half the students who did remember their time spent in mixed-ability classrooms, many of them had no recall of ever receiving instruction or work differentiated from the rest of the class, and if they were given any, it often failed to meet their needs or interests. Students agreed that they often received the same work and the same amount of time as their peers, even though they already knew or had previously learnt the content and
An unexpected finding of this study is that there is an acceptance among participants that effective or even guided extension is not a given nor is it even expected in some cases. Participants have shared a range of reasons for this acceptance:

- **It only affects a few students**: It is extra work for only a few people (S3, S6 & S11). These students felt that having to provide extension or different work was unfair on the teacher, as teachers had already prepared for the rest of the class. One student suggested that any additional work might just be a sheet that does not put you ahead of other students but just keeps your brain moving to prevent further gaps between students (S3).

- **Teacher Time**: In any regular classroom, the reality is that teacher to student ratios mean that teachers have a limited amount of time available to offer each student and to organise and deliver extension work (S4, S11 and Group A). “In a normal classroom, the situation is, unfortunately, they don’t get that [the chance to be extended] because the teacher is busy with the whole class” (Group A).

- **National Curriculum**: One student believed that the curriculum is established for each year level and a student would only expect to learn what has been set for that year and not hold expectations for more advanced work. “Since it is just a regular class, I think they should just get the average work that students of that year are doing… I think they should just get the education for that grade” (S6).

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1 For this study, the term ‘extension’ was used during interviews to express any form of differentiation, as it was a familiar term to the participants.
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- *School textbooks*: One parent had a clear memory of asking for appropriate mathematics work for her child. It was near the beginning of the year, and the child could demonstrate an understanding of the concepts throughout the class mathematics book. The teacher regretfully informed the parent that this was not possible, as the child would have nothing to do the following year if she completed next year’s work now. The parent then decided to take on the role of teaching her child after school with mathematics books she purchased herself (D2).

- *Under the Radar*: Students do not always demonstrate their abilities. Participants in the parent and student groups admitted that some students choose to take an easy route and cruise through school. Parent B3 expressed that as the students already know enough of the curriculum to get through, they regularly chose the easy path and only did what they had to do (B2 & B3).

- *Mismatched Extension Options*: Extension work, in the form of tasks to be completed when all set class work was complete, was the only form of differentiation some students remembered. At times, students preferred completing routine tasks in the allocated time rather than finishing early and having to complete additional tasks set by the teacher. Finishing work early usually meant reading a book, doing art/drawing, quiet work, helping others, completing more of the same type of work, or waiting (S1, S3, S4, S8, S9, S11 & D2). These options were not always inspiring to students with one expressing that they hated art and as this was usually the finishing off activity in one year, she would instead work extra slowly to avoid it. S8 shared that in an attempt to avoid art extension, she “would take longer to finish it [her work]. Like if I could easily add up a sum I wouldn’t, I would do the working out for it instead of adding it up in my head” (S8).
To qualify for extension or differentiation within the mixed-ability class, students often had to complete all the work set for the rest of the class, even if they already knew it (S11). Students also found it difficult to produce high-quality answers to questions they found boring, feeling more motivation when the work was challenging. “When it is harder you think really hard to get a really good answer” (S3). One student admitted that she sometimes used her extra energy and time to misbehave instead of doing better.

Parent B3 felt that returning to a mixed-ability class after time in the Opportunity Class was not a positive for him, as he lost his desire to engage in the learning process. She observed the love of learning he was developing in the Opportunity Class program did not survive a return to the mixed-ability classroom as expressed below:

I think from my point of view last year was a wasted year because he went from being challenged and pushed and being made to do stuff, to just going back into a normal class where he could just slot in and cruise along. I don’t think he really learnt anything last year. He didn’t come home with any extra enthusiasm for anything. He just cruised.

Extension and differentiation were not, or did not appear to be offered in the mixed-ability classroom for the reasons listed above. The following section clarified when they were available, how they were offered and how successful the participants appraised each form to be.

- **Within class extension**: The participants who did believe that differentiation and or extension was provided in the mixed-ability class all reported different experiences. Only participant C3 felt that their child was regularly extended and allowed to work to
their potential within the regular class. Parent C2 mentioned that they knew of times when two classes opened their connecting wall and collaborated to create ability groups. Two students, S10 and S2, supported this and found the ability-based reading groups interesting and often fun. Student S2 said that she was bored and snoozed a bit through Year 5 but was highly appreciative of all the effort her teacher put into trying to keep her involved and interested. An example of the within class extension offered by the teacher was ability clustered reading groups. Student S2 shared that a new reading group was created just for the three most able students in the class:

We split up into another group, and she put other students in that group, and that made me feel great, and she gave us some harder stuff, like instead of giving us thin novels, like the other groups, we had harder stuff, like high vocabulary in spelling and thicker novels.

According to participants, within class differentiation and extension had a degree of success when a cluster of students of similar ability had the opportunity to work together. Unfortunately, S7 had no equivalent academic peers and felt that extension and differentiation was a double-edged sword. With different work came a sense of isolation. She described a preoccupation with what the rest of the class was doing and how it was more intriguing to watch others than progress through the work she was meant to be doing.

The most common report from students was that they were given some challenging tasks, but often, they had nothing to go on with. Any work that was labelled extension was to be completed after the set class work and was often viewed as busy work or more of the same. It did not require a lot of independent thought and therefore was not very motivating (S11).
• **Withdrawal**: This option was only offered intermittently and usually only for Mathematics (S4, S5, A3, A6). Even though parents appreciated the mathematics withdrawal opportunities, A3 felt that this may be perceived as segregating students and may make them feel separate from their class. Student S5 expressed that they enjoyed the opportunity to work at a higher level for the one hour a week but the rest of the week was like revision all the time (S5).

• **P.E.A.C (Primary Extension and Challenge Program)**: PEAC is an off premises withdrawal program, run by the Department of Education half a day a week. It is available to government primary school students who were determined, through statewide standardised testing in Year 4, as the most gifted in the State. Participants felt that PEAC was a very positive experience but that it only offered extension for a short period each week and meant students had to take time away from their own class (D2). “At school, we learn a lot more than we do at PEAC. PEAC is more about the ways of learning and how to think where school is more about what to learn” (S3).

**Social and Emotional Wellbeing**

Over three-quarters of the student participants shared that they felt emotionally or socially comfortable in a mixed-ability class. They were mostly happy and had good friendships in their mixed-ability classes. The frustrations that some did feel arose from either working with other students that did not value learning or a lack of academic challenge. The deeper, richer friendships some discovered once in the program are discussed later in this chapter.
Emotionally, a quarter of the student participants found the mixed-ability classroom to be emotionally draining at some point or emotionally unsupportive. “I would have to push through the day because it was a mixture of now get to school and be good then there was a mixture of boredom and tolerating the annoying people next to you” (S2). Student S8 felt fed up when she was used as a behaviour buffer between misbehaving students or as an ongoing free information source (S4 and S8). This sense of being different was magnified when she did well on a test because she felt she could not share her happiness or excitement. “They were all proud with getting 50% and I was thinking that’s not a good score. You don’t have the same expectations” (S8).

It was rare for teachers to use students with high academic ability as teacher helpers unless the student sought out this recognition and responsibility. S10 and S11 said it made them feel good to be able to help someone else. S3 felt the same but worried about the differences in their understanding:

I felt good because I knew I would be helping someone learn a bit more. I also felt worried that I wouldn’t be able to help them much, and I would just make it more complicated. The teacher tells them one way to do it, and then I explain my way to do it, it just confuses them.

Parents had a very different perception; feeling that their child was often asked to take on the role of the little teacher. Focus Groups A and C talked about gifted students being used as a behaviour buffer and Focus Groups C and D about them helping other students to complete academic work. B3 was proud that her child’s report expressed how willing he was to help his classmates understand and complete class
work but at the same time, she was upset at the wasted opportunities for him to advance his own learning “I’m not sending him to school just help everybody else” (B3). She said that she felt this happened far too frequently.

Any emotional issues and lack of challenge became most apparent to parents and some students around middle primary; therefore, this is the time that most believe the program would be best to begin. Due to the ethical restrictions of interviewing students who had been taught by the researcher, most of the students interviewed had not experienced the program at a young age and gave no comment. Student S8 gave a response that addressed the emotional, social, and academic needs of a gifted student:

Maybe three but definitely by (Year) four, you need it. Your personality is definitely coming out at that point and friends matter. Who you’re friends with and also the people who are wanting to learn and get extended, they are finally like we have had enough of not being extended. I didn’t really feel like I was getting extended in those younger years because I didn’t know what getting extended felt like and I just didn’t feel right in a way.

Many parents thought that before Year 3 only the most exceptional students would be identifiable. They reasoned, was because younger students learning ebbed and flowed so much that they would be difficult to pinpoint and some younger students were more preoccupied with learning where they fit in socially than showing their academic strengths or working hard (A2, B1, B4, B8, C3, D2 & D4). One parent felt this especially applied to the boys (C5). Focus Group C perceived that the developmental learning style used in the earlier years was flexible enough for most students. Parents whose children had been bored since the beginning of primary school wanted the program to start at Year. After hearing the views of others and reflecting on the practical issues, they ended up agreeing on a later start would
The other benefit to a mid primary start to the program was that it gave students time to gain their emotional or social confidence. Readiness was thought to come through maturity and opportunities to compare themselves to others (A1 & A3). For some, it was also the right time for them to have a reality check, as they were starting to put themselves above others (B5 & C5). Parents B2 and B3 felt if comparing the senior and junior classes in the program; they varied in that the senior focussed more on academics and the junior program allowed students to show their range of talents in a greater variety of ways with more enrichment activities based on interest (Appendix A).

Most students expressed that they felt a sense of belonging socially and emotionally during their time in a mixed-ability classroom and did not expect any additional or special treatment. Both parents and students expressed an appreciation and acceptance of any efforts made to extend or challenge students, even when they also perceived these as intermittent and partially successful. Some students even appreciated no differentiation or extension as it gave them a chance to avoid challenge. Only twice were classroom teachers seen as able to provide their gifted students with appropriate ongoing challenge. It was generally agreed that issues around a lack of challenge and belonging evolved around middle primary school and many of the participants were part of the Opportunity Class program by this level of schooling.

c. The Programs Academic, Social, and Emotional Effects on Students

The Program as a Full-Time Ability Class

To understand the impact of the program, participants were asked if being in the
Opportunity Classes at Pondview Primary School created any issues or benefits for them beyond what they would have normally experienced at school. They were invited to share how it had affected them or their children in terms of long, medium, and short-term outcomes. Participants were asked directly about their experiences with topics commonly found in the literature such as big-fish-little-pond effect, friendships, labelling, and a forced-choice dilemma (see chapter 2 literature review, social and emotional challenges). Despite being an academically based program, the greatest number of responses concerned social-emotional topics.

**Long and medium term effects of being a class member**

Participants had limited expectations of any longer-term effects from the program. Most responses focussed on the years the students were in the program and the immediate effect at that time. When asked directly what long term effects the program could have on them, students S7 and S10 thought that it helped them gain their place in a high school GATE program and student S5 saw the program as on the path to university. Parents B2, B3 and C2, talked about how being in the program or the associated enrichment activities helped shape their child’s desire to work in a specific field or pursue a more academic career in their future.

Every student and two parents who participated in this study thought the program offered good preparation for the curriculum encountered in high school and the development of valuable collaboration and time management skills (A1 & D1). Student S4 pinpointed the lessons of time management, and perseverance were those that they might carry through life. One parent felt that the program transformed how their child thought. It helped them to become more creative and critical thinkers with an increased desire and ability to problem-solve (B3). This outcome was elaborated upon by another parent in the same group with the
thought that it improved motivation and self-esteem. “It has just brought out his confidence, his aspirations and his expectation of himself” (B8).

**Igniting the love of learning: Immediate effects of being in the program**

Overwhelmingly, participants viewed time in the program as a positive experience. When asked specifically about any difficulties they faced at school around the themes in the literature, such as labelling and forced choice dilemmas, many participants could not recall it ever happening, and some found it difficult to believe that it may have happened.

From a student’s point of view, learning alongside other people who could work at a similar pace and level of understanding allowed them to experience challenge and extension on an ongoing basis. This feeling was expressed by almost all students and supported by parents. Student S4 explained that being in the class provided opportunities for students to work at a higher level than they previously could because they were no longer needed to wait for other students of lesser ability. “People who need to have extension can have extension without having to wait for other people to catch up or [without] being kept back waiting” (S4). They went on to say that when the more difficult work was explained to them, that the other students might become confused and overwhelmed and “freak out because they just don’t get it.”

Extension and pace also meant staying engaged with the work and a need for increased focus. Student S2 reported that they enjoyed the program because it finally gave them a chance to learn new concepts, but this also meant they could no longer just sit back and catch up later. “I couldn’t just laze back because it is not just going to be a breeze” (S2) and because everything “was sort of higher and it wasn’t just stuff that I knew” (S2).
Parents also felt that the increased work pace set by the program and the embedded culture of higher expectations assisted in moving students from being bored to challenged. It allowed the students to take their learning as far as they needed to, there was always something to do, and they were encouraged to ask questions. Many parents made a special mention of the interschool, state, and national TOMs and solar boat competitions students entered during their time in the class. Entry to these competitions was only possible due to time gained through curriculum compaction. Meaning pretesting of the mandated national curriculum to determine what students already knew plus working at an accelerated pace, students gained time enough time in their day to pursue problem-based competitions. Parents thought that the competitions were a highlight. “From a parent’s point of view what the kids got out of it was incredible” (P2). Even with the hours invested into each competition, participation was seen as an addition to their learning, not a distraction.

Participants in Focus Group D discussed the idea that the program offered a class in which the students felt the learning was more individually focused and student driven. “It becomes more about them, doesn’t it [group agreement], about their development and then they are stimulated more, and then I found they were more interested in wanting to learn and more interested because there was more to do” (D1). Students were given the freedom to learn in a way that expected them to take control. Parent C1 expressed how the difference in expectations created a love of learning:

The environment was different as far as the range of students and the way they were encouraged to think about things was different rather than learning stuff straight. She had never experienced and how do you think about that, why do you think that and not told to go here and look but you need to find this, go, and they weren’t even told how to do it. It was like wow, we have to find this. It was exciting for her to be chucked (sic) in the deep end and be expected to swim.
The program expanded the student’s ability to think creatively, laterally and to problem solve (focus group B). “After they went through [the junior program] I could see the difference in his thinking. It was a bit more problem solving and more creative after your program than before” (B1). Unfortunately, this love of learning was not robust enough for one student who returned to the mixed-ability class after two years in the junior program B3. The experiences of other students who returned to the mixed-ability classroom are noted later in this section.

Labelling

The understated or low-key approach of this program was discussed earlier in this chapter. Its adoption was perceived as a key factor in reducing any separation or discrimination between school members. The success of the low-key approach can be measured by the acceptance of the school community of the program and its members.

Students were adamant that they had never been labelled negatively for being in the program and could not see why they would have been. About half the students did say, that at one point or another, a reference had been made to them as being in the smart class but if was often said by friends and in a conversational way with no negative connotations. The students and the program are blended into the school to the point that some members of the senior program remained unaware of the junior program for an extended period (S6, S7 & S10).

Parents believed that the reason the students are viewed as the same as any other student in the school was attributable to all children in the school being treated equally (A3). To ensure attention was not drawn to any differences, the classes existence was not broadcast and not viewed as a big deal. “It’s just that this is the class they are in, and that’s the way it
Forced choice dilemma

Forced choice dilemma was explained to participants as, the masking, dumbing down or hiding of abilities to be accepted or liked more by their peers. As with labelling, students altering their behaviour to fit in were almost unheard of, and most participants had never done this or experienced it. Parent B3 and student S8 qualified their response with a vague recollection of some holding back during play but not in any academic context. Student S7 was the only participant who felt that they had ever had to choose to hide their abilities and it as to fit in with the cool group at her previous school.

Self-esteem and relationships

As well as feeling challenged and engaged by the academic content of the program, students also felt a sense of connection and inclusion. They felt positive about themselves and the working relationship they had with their peers in the program. Several students felt the culture in the class was very positive and supportive with students S7 and S11 believing that the similarity between peers and maturity of class members made it easier to learn and created a tighter knit class. “No one ever laughed at you because you didn’t understand something or you were a bit behind, or no one ever ignored you. You always got help if you were struggling” (S2).

Parents mostly discussed how being in the program helped their children to become happier and well balanced. Parents thought being in the program gave students the opportunity to realise that they are not alone and that they belonged (A3, B3, B5 and C1). “I think she got social confidence because suddenly she realised that she is not different from
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everyone else. There are other people who are just like she is, where she thought she was the only one” (C1). Parents also found that the challenge of the class allowed children who were exhibiting perfectionist tendencies to accept that it was not always possible to get everything right (A2 & D4). Two parents shared times in which the teacher gave feedback to their children that resulted in their children being emotional and experiencing a sense of failure, followed by a self-reflection and then a drive and determination to improve. These students had often received praise for all their work before, and the challenge and expectation of the program was a new experience. Parents believe the new level of challenge and higher expectations that that came with the program did not always result in success, though it did change the way in which their children worked and it encouraged resilience (A6 & D4).

For other parents the reality check offered by the program was beneficial. The more rigorous curriculum and a class full of students who were equally gifted helped students to become grounded (Group A, C3, C4 and D4). “Rather than seeing himself as the best in the class he just sees himself as another student” (C3). It was concluded by some parents that the ongoing praise some students continually received might have contributed to a few of them developing a sense of superiority. This sometimes alienated them from others. Student S8 was appreciative of learning not to be so controlling and to value the strengths of others. She felt that students in the program were used to being leaders and wanted to control groups and the way things were done. The program allowed her to realise “there are these other people who also want to be the top as well, and because we all had our strengths we began to know when to say that they should be at the top [leader] this time” (S8).

Students thought that overall the class was socially and emotionally supportive. “Everyone was friendly and kind to each other” (S2) and nonjudgmental. Parents perceived
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the program to have a different tone socially to other classes. “They are more of a team; they have each other’s backs” (B2). Parent C2 thought that the program offered a safe environment where exploring concepts and taking academic risks was encouraged amongst peers who understood each other. The program environment gave students a sense of “confidence to speak out and for it to be okay because the person next to you is going to get what you are talking about” (C2).

Friendships

Student participants had different experiences with friendships before their time in the program. All students reported having friends at school; however, the connections students felt varied. Once in the program, students found they could maintain old friendships if they wished as they were still at the same school (S3, S4, S6 and S11) as well as develop new ones. Student S7 identified some of her peers in the program as social leaders of the school and part of the school’s cool group.

For some students, friendship levels changed once in the program. Some described their earlier friends as people they liked and hung around with but not as someone they related to or bonded deeply with. “There’s always that group of people you find and sit down with at recess, and you basically stick around with” (S5). For some of the students, it appears that they have always had friends but being in the Opportunity Class resulted in them discovering people they could develop deeper friendships with based on their common interests and ways of thinking. In a mixed-ability class or school, students with similar interests will often find each other, but in a big school, they may not share a class for many years. Students S8 had always had friends but did not feel a deep connection with them due to several different interests. She shared her reflections of friendships before and after entering the program:
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While I’m more of a quiet person compared to some other kids and so in the years before the Opportunity Classes, I struggled to make friends, and there were a few issues because I didn’t sort of like the same things or act the same way as other people would do. Like makeup and that sort of stuff. I was just like whatever. And they were like, we want it. And so, it was a bit hard. I had one friend, but then we both got in the Opportunity Class, and in there everybody else was sort of the same in like (sic) they knew when to stop talking and just focus, but you’d have fun at the same time, and our interests were the same, so yes it helped with friendships.

The program helped students to find others who shared their values and interests. “It puts more people who have the same kind of interests and abilities together, so we kind of have the same interests and things that we like, so we have more of a chance of bonding as a class” (S5). Two students who had only been in the program for a couple of months said that they did not think making friends in the program was any different from in any other class.

Parents in focus group B agreed that students of similar strong academic ability are also likely to have other social and emotional similarities. “It’s like minds, you know, they have the same kind of mind, they want the same kind of thing, and they get on socially as well as at school” B8. Parents in this group believe that these students may have become friends anyway but putting them in the same class helps them find each other.

Parents also saw a difference in the type of friendships their children developed once they were placed in the Opportunity Class. One parent noted a reduction in their child’s frustration levels during play and the use of more efficient communication. Once in the program, students appeared to be able to interact with each other on a level many age peers were not. Parent A3 shared the interactions they observed when friends came over to their house to play:
My son used to struggle a little bit socially [regular class] he had a lot of friends, he was best friends with everybody, but I could see when I watched him play and interact that it wasn’t the same. He would often get frustrated or feel a bit agitated because the friend wasn’t understanding quite what he was wanting to do or where he was wanting to take the game. Here he has really gelled with a few friends. For him socially, it’s great because he just has to say one word and the other kids understand exactly what he is talking about, and they’re off. So, we have had no social issues this year whatsoever.

The ongoing influx of students from the surrounding new housing estate and the current size of the school allowing for up to six classes at each grade level often results in students having many new classmates. As the Opportunity Class is a fully academically selected class, even with yearly testing, students often stay with many of the same peers each year. The classes within the program are Multi-Age Grouped (MAG) meaning that one-half of the class rolls over at the end of the year so that the younger students become the eldest in the class and so on.

Due to the M.A.G arrangement of the Opportunity Class, each student has 6-8 other students of the same age and gender to bond with. This factor is important, as students seemed to prefer friendships with others of the same grade level and gender. When these groups shared a common interest, being with the same group for consecutive years was ideal. When a student had different interests, then their sense of belonging was affected. Within the program, each year level cohort seemed to have a group of males who shared a love of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), or a passion for sports (B4), not both. Student(s) who did not share the same interests as the majority were included but did not feel connected socially to the group (B2 & B5). Parent B4 found that her son had limited
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friendships from within the class as his “interests were very sporting and not many students in the class were. Many were IT-based, and that is not him at all” (B4).

Regarding attitude, students who were perceived to display high levels of *arrogance* also found it difficult to establish friendships until they were willing to adjust. For the girls, issues tended to be around the overthinking of things said by others (A1 & D1). “With one of the girls there was lots of drama all the time, and it really impacted because been a small group it was a really huge thing” (A1).

**Big-fish-little-pond effect**

As the concept of big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) was unknown to participants, the researcher explained to participants that it meant students sometimes lost their belief in their academic strength if placed in a class full of other academically strong students. Participants were asked if they had experienced this effect and how they responded.

Most students dismissed the concept of a lowered perception of their abilities. Instead, they explained that they felt good amongst other high-achieving peers. “I was kind of happy to see that other people were up with me as well because I can then talk to them about things because normally I would explain it and it became kind of annoying” (S11) and “I saw lots of people who were smarter or at the same level as me in a variety of subjects. I just honestly thought of it as one big challenge, and I felt a bit happy to take it on” (S6).

Student S9 believed that student’s academic abilities did not change when they joined the program, but they were given the opportunity to see their talents in a more realistic way:

The ability stayed the same, but when you see the others people’s abilities, you can
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compare your ability a bit more realistically. Like I think it is kind of biased if you think Oh yeah, I’m good in one class but not everyone has the same ability as you. But if you compare yourself to a group that has the same kind of potential or ability as you, you can kind of see where you are at.

The above was an example of BFLPE that the student saw as a positive. Only student S2 expressed any negative perception of her ability as she compared herself to others. “At the start of the year, I thought I was becoming smarter because I was learning more, and I think that was true, but towards the end of the year I felt sort of shrinking down” S2. This comparison was made concerning the limited progress she had made compared to others in the class. The student began to feel less academically capable as the work became more challenging. “I felt like everyone could have been a bit better [when in the mixed-ability class before the program], not to be mean, and in the Opportunity Class, I felt like I was really dumb. So, I think I was somewhere in the middle” (S2). Despite her expressed feelings, student S2 attributes her decision to try out for the creative GATE high school to her time in the program. “Being in the Opportunity Class I felt like I wasn’t, you know, I’m a little bit more than regular (sic)” (S2).

As academic results were rarely shared or a point of focus, most students found it difficult to pinpoint their academic standing in the class. “Half the time we didn’t even know we did tests. It was like we were just doing activities and because we didn’t get results back, we soon forgot about them” (S8). Most peer-to-peer comparisons happened more informally when working with each other in class (S2, S3, S7 and S8). When students S7 and S8 first joined the program, they felt they were behind everyone else. They pointed out that they were in the younger year level of the multi-age group and these feelings quickly went away due to the support they received from the other students. Student S8 shared that comparison between students was not fostered:
You could sort of compare yourself to others, but that is something I found frustrating about primary school, is that they never gave you back your results. So, the teachers sort of kept it to themselves, and for me, I found that really annoying. I wanted to know if I did good or if I did bad (sic) but you sort of knew. Everyone knows if someone is really smart or not, but we all level out if you did an average, even if you included sport and stuff. You didn’t really brag or anything, and you didn’t really rank yourself, and there was no ranking system.

Parents were more certain that some of their children felt the BFLPE, but only two articulated any direct observations. One simply stated that her child had “felt the drop” A6 but did not elaborate, and the other said that their child had doubts initially about whether they were “good enough” to be in the program (B4). Both students joined the junior program and remained in it through their senior years.

Other parents saw the new light in which their children evaluated their abilities as a positive. They found that their children were thriving on the challenge to keep up with others or to improve themselves. “He is now not the top, just amongst equals, [P4 interjected, “a level playing field”] but I see by his actions and his words that it is a real positive thing. He is really enjoying that” (A3).

When the researcher informed parents that some people viewed any reduction in self-belief or academic confidence as a reality check or an adjustment to a more realistic view of their talent, most parents readily agreed that this was what their child had experienced. “I think it is important that they are more grounded about their ability” (C3). Parents elaborated noting that as the students became older, they would move into bigger and bigger ponds and that the reality checks might as well happen now as oppose to when they were older and had
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other bigger issues. “You have to jump into the big pond at some point, it is a matter of
timing so why lose the chance of being in this great class just because you are going to bring
that forward” (C1).

**Stress**

Any stress levels in the class, according to the students, were attributable to their
particular drive and personality, not the program. Student S11 was the only participant who
reported a concern that her everyday performance may affect her ability to secure a place in
the program for subsequent years. She found this stressful at times. Student S7 felt that any
stress levels were at healthy levels. “There is a little bit of stress but not too much. It is
healthy stress. Not enough stress is bad and too much is bad. It was a healthy level of stress”
(S7). Students S8 and S9 thought of themselves as naturally stressed and that they created
additional levels for themselves. Student S8 believed that any stress they felt was of their own
doing:

> The teachers aren’t putting the stress on you, but then I put the stress on myself, and
I just need to understand that. It’s me, not them. And so, there wasn’t really that
much work. We didn’t have to take anything home, but I still did because that’s
what I wanted to do. Everything seemed sort of casual in a way. I didn’t get stressed
about it. Sometimes I did because it was mixed with my PEAC, but now that I look
back I’m just, nah, I wasn’t stressed then, and now I’m stressed [high school
GATE].

Many aspects of the program were considered to contribute to keeping stress levels
low. Students felt they had some say in what was studied, lessons were fun, presented in
interesting ways, and teachers supported anyone having difficulties and would adjust the time
allocated to tasks to reflect student interests and needs. Student S8 found that the teacher was
flexible about the timetable:

If she [our teacher] found, we were enjoying something or if there was something we were not really understanding we would sort of push everything else to the side because we still understood that and we could just work on what we were interested in for the week or something. Whereas not having to stick to a plan we could go wherever we want, and we could catch up really quickly. And so, then we wouldn’t have to be focused on one thing at a time, we could do several things.

Also, the program was described as focusing on intrinsic motivation. Each student was encouraged to achieve their personal best and not to concentrate on comparing their grades to everyone else. “There wasn’t really large consequences (sic) [to unfinished work]. I think it was just mentally feeling I could have done this” (S2). Personal best was reinforced with the sharing of results being up to the student (S2 & S3). Parent D1 felt that the emphasis in the class was a love of learning and learning with interest:

I don’t think it was overly pushed [grades]. I think it was always made to be interesting and fun wasn’t it [agreed by group]. I didn’t ever see it. My daughter never came home saying that it was really hard, but she did say how interesting it was and how lucky it was that they got to do this and how lucky they were to get to do that, or this part was interesting it was never that it was really hard or we were pushed or anything like that.

Focus groups and students held a common view that the program itself did not create student stress. According to their parents, some students were prone to stress by nature, and the program did not exacerbate or change it very much (B4 & B1). Student S2 had previously reported that she was the type of person to put pressure on herself and create stress for
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herself. She claimed at one point that the senior Opportunity Class she was in did not create
stress as there were no real consequences for incomplete work or poor grades but also
claimed that she felt pressure to do well. She often thought she was not doing as well as some
other students, as she did not have a class average as a comparison point.

Parent A2 whose child had just completed their second year in the junior Opportunity
Class did not associate the program with additional levels of stress but rather additional levels
of excitement:

I don’t think there was any increased stress seen from my daughter at all. There
wasn’t any *I have to do this, and I have to do that*. She loved she could do the Year
4 work when she was in Year 3. She thought it was awesome. But there was never, I
have to do this, or I’m not going to be doing enough. There was no increased stress.

The Mixed-Ability Class Experience After the Program

Only one student could speak from personal experience of what it was like to return to
a mixed-ability class. After being in the senior Opportunity Class program for a year, she
returned to a mixed-ability class, where she missed a proportion of the year due to outside
factors. Student S2 felt that the mixed-ability class was a good option as it afforded her a
more relaxed year:

In Year 7, I was pretty much like in between the middle and the top, so there
wasn’t really a lot of pressure on me. There was some residual like pressure that
was still there from the Opportunity Class, like having the expectation on myself.
But apart from that, it was all pretty good.

Four parents offered their personal insight into what it was like for their children to
return to a mixed-ability class after being part of the program for at least a year. Experiences varied for each student. The smoothest transition was for the student whose program teacher became the teacher of their mixed-ability class and continued to offer a high degree of extension. “I don’t think there was really a difference because they had the same teacher that they had had in the Opportunity Class. If they didn’t have her, it might be totally different” (D1).

For others, students being placed in a class with known friends and the natural easing of work expectations assisted the transition. “He was fine. His personality was like ‘at least I’m not the last’. He went back to normal class, and he was fine because his friends were there.” (C5). Parent B3 thought her child’s return to the mixed-ability class was socially positive but not academically. “I think he enjoyed the break last year. I think he thought that he would just cruise through, he was going just to sail through, and he did” (B3). The parent explained that her child was not traditionally academically high achieving, but he did think differently to others, and once he returned to the mixed-ability class he lost the enthusiasm and passion for learning he had developed in the program. Parent C1 said her child missed the social aspect of the Opportunity Class, the dynamics of how they worked together (C1).

In summary, the Opportunity Classes were academic select classes that appeared to value cooperative learning, student engagement and appropriate challenge over academic prowess and scores. Student scores were kept low key, rarely shared and rankings were not used. With the reduced focus on academic comparisons, most students in turn reported less stress and found moving into the Big Pond of academic equals to be a bonding experience that also allowed them to remain connected to and accepted by the school community. Students continued to be engaged in the learning process while in the program, with some showing signs of longer term benefits such as improved beliefs in their abilities and future. The
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students who found the academic standards in the class beyond their ability and were not reselected, felt that they did not fully belong in either type of class and were thought to often fail to work to their capacity the following year. There were no signs of stigma noted from other school members about moving between the program and the mixed ability classrooms.

Suggestions for Improvement

Overwhelmingly the students and parents reported that they thought the program worked as a successful gifted and talented provision for the school. The program offered students a way to learn together, access to appropriate extension and feel included (S10). Parents all agreed that the program from the selection process to the running of the classes was well done and that the overarching low-key approach was an essential of its success. Some parents called for smaller class sizes or homework, which cannot be accommodated by the school. Additionally, it would go against the principles of keeping the program as similar to other classes as possible. Parent A summarised what most parents seemed to feel: “If it’s not broken don’t fix it” (A).
Chapter 5: Discussion

This research will contribute to the old, yet unresolved argument around whether full-time academic ability grouping is an effective education option for gifted students. This study sought to explore if the Opportunity Class program at Pondview Primary School was successful in providing learning experiences that were commensurate with the needs of the school’s gifted student population as well as reviewing previous gifted provisions. The program offered was designed to cater for students at the primary school who were moderate to mildly gifted. In this study, eleven students and 24 parents were interviewed to gain their perception of the effects of the program on students.

This chapter is presented in three sections. The first discusses the selection of students for the program, from nomination to testing and makes suggestions on who should teach the program. The second reviews how students were catered for in the mixed ability classrooms they attended prior to being accepted into the Opportunity Class program. It reviews the provisions offered, how they met or did not meet students’ academic and social and emotional needs and how students felt about the types and levels of provisions they were offered. The third section focuses on the Opportunity Program itself. It discusses what they thought the program was able to offer them socially, emotionally and academically. It explores how the program addressed issues of stress, BFLPE, labelling, friendships within the class, across the school and in relation to the literature.

The school in this study is referred to as Pondview Primary School and the program as The Opportunity Classes.
Student Selection and Who Should Teach the Program

Participants described the entire selection process for the full-time academic program at this school as understated or low-key. Most full time academic programs, including the Opportunity Classes in NSW that this program was based on, select students from a wide catchment area and chose students who test in the top few percent in multiple domains. At Pondview Primary School, only students from the existing school population are accepted, testing forms part of the selection process with teacher observations and nominations having a considerable influence, especially for younger students.

Participants were unable to explain the exact criteria for acceptance into the program but were able to explain that the aim was to identify the schools’ academically gifted population from year 3 onwards through a nominations and testing process. They perceived the target population of the program to be all students who are academically gifted to some degree, including the twice exceptional and those underachieving.

As the GATE coordinator, I knew that only those students nominated as potentially gifted were tested, with teachers and myself making the final decision. Parents and students are not asked to nominate students for testing; however, individual parent judgment is considered, but rarely requested. The Department of Education Western Australia (2011) includes in its guidelines that parent information and peer nominations could be used to aid in the identification of gifted students. The school in this study lists peer identification as part of its selection process (Appendix A), however, like many other programs academic selective programs in Australian and America, it does not utilise this option. Peer nomination has been shown to be an infrequent tool for schools to use when identifying gifted students (Archambault Jr et al., 1993; Jarvis & Henderson, 2015). At this school, students and parents were generally against either of them being part of the nomination process as they saw it as
Parents especially thought increasing the involvement of students or parents in nominations process or the program would not be supportive of the low-key approach that was desired. One parent expressed that a call for nominations would make it part of the *schoolyard* discussion and ultimately this would take the focus off the program and it being about differentiating for the needs of individual students, instead, making it about everyone else. Two students expressed that parent nomination would ensure that all students were considered but the teacher would have to make the final decision. Overall participants viewed teachers as being the most qualified to recommend who would benefit from the program as they observed the students in the school setting and could compare performances within this environment.

Selection of students for the program occurs at the end of each year. All students nominated as potential program participants, including those already in the program, are tested and evaluated for a place in the following year. Participants considered annual selection as an equitable way to give all tested students the chance to be selected. It was perceived as allowing the school to evaluate the dynamics and participants in the program and ensure students’ needs were being met in the best possible way. Only one student voiced that they were concerned that their everyday performance in the Opportunity Class could influence their re-selection for the following year. For her, this was a motivating, yet ongoing stressful factor. No student or parent advocated for the removal of annual selection. When other programs found in the literature discussed selection, it appears that it was always for the term of the program, with each appearing to be for a minimum two-year period (Delcourt et al., 2007; State of New South Wales, 2017; Vidergor & Azar, 2015).
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The Pondview Primary School program could be considered heterogeneous due to the range of talents, interests and areas of strengths and weaknesses students exhibited. A couple of student participants mentioned that in previous years they thought that one or two students were not as bright as the others and probably should not have been in the program. Parents felt they were unable to comment on the ability of students in the program as they were not in the classroom. However, both students and parents questioned the acceptance of students with behaviour issues into the program. Some parents thought that poor behaviour conflicted with their understanding of the purpose of the program. They felt there was a shared understanding that the program was created as a way of offering students that are more capable, the opportunity for extension among similar ability peers. It was suggested by one parent that the purpose of the program was not clearly communicated and they it as one for gifted, not gifted and well-behaved students. After some discussion in the focus groups, it was agreed that the program could also be a modifier of poor behaviour choices if these had arisen out of lack of challenge or being fostered by previous peer acceptance and were only displayed by a small minority of students. To develop talent, it takes appropriate challenge and commitment over time (Gyarmathy, 2013; Matthews & Dai, 2014; Reis, 2003) and this was considered as a valid reason to accept students with behaviour issues or limited development in their talent, if an option was available for these students to be exited out of the program if it interfered with other students learning.

The teacher was viewed as an important factor in the way the program operated. For parents, the selection of a teacher who had an interest in or specialised in gifted education was more of a priority than it was for students. As with the parents in Vidergor and Azar (2015) study, the parents in this research believed a teacher of the program should have special characteristics, teaching strategies and methods beyond other teachers. One Pondview parent expressed that the teacher may be the most important factor in the
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program’s success. Two focus groups expressed the need for compatibility between teaching methods and student’s learning preferences (Vidergor & Azar, 2015). Parents supported the idea that if the students were different, to ensure a genuine connection, it only made sense that their teacher also be special. Interviewed students had not previously considered what qualities a teacher in this type of class might have, however when asked three students expressed that they thought any teacher could teach the program if they have enough content knowledge. Five students listed qualities that may have been valued in any class such as a sense of humour, being nice and ability to relate to students. McCann (2005) found that many teachers are not trained to provide instructions in a way that accounts for the way students with gifts learn and think and therefore not all teachers are trained to be effective teachers of students with gifts.

Other Gifted Provisions that had Previously been Experienced by Participants

Most full-time academic gifted programs are designed for the most highly gifted students. Moderately and mildly gifted students are thought to be able to be catered for in a mixed-ability class, by adjustments to the regular curriculum (Silverman, 2013). For those students in this research who could remember their time in a mixed-ability classroom, over half could not recall ever receiving instructions or work that was different from the rest of the class. The students who could remember described varying degrees of differentiation and or extension. Eighty-six percent of teachers in Jarvis and Henderson (2015) study reported using differentiation to cater for students with gifts in the mixed-ability classroom and in a study by Bicknell and Riley (2013) over 84% of schools reported the use of provisions for gifted and talented students. How frequently students have access to the provisions or differentiation is not recorded. Gallagher et al. (2010) found that the reality in the mixed-ability classroom is that gifted students do not have their educational needs met. This finding is supported by participants in this thesis who reported that differentiation was infrequently
The surprising finding of this study is that there is an acceptance amongst students, that while they were in a mixed-ability class, the appropriate extension was not a provided, nor was it expected, or in some cases wanted. Some students felt that it was unfair for teachers to have to prepare extra work for only a few students. They also felt that teachers did not have the time to deliver differentiated or extension work. Students also worried that if they completed additional or advanced work they might end up too far ahead of the rest of the class, causing more issues. Unfortunately, this is an example of the mixed-ability classroom where teaching to the middle and supporting those who struggle is the norm, and the development of gifted students becomes a part-time pursuit (Bernal, 2003).

Most students in this study suggested teachers rarely used them to support the learning of less able students, but other students frequently used them for answers. Allan (1991, p. 64) found that students did not mind helping sometimes but did not want to take on the role of teacher. Parents had a very different perception, feeling that their children were frequently asked to take on the role of a mini teacher. Colangelo and Davis (1997) found that using students to teach others was not uncommon in the mixed-ability group. Watters et al. (2013) found in their research that preservice teachers are more aware of the needs of gifted students to be challenged and only 10% of those questioned suggesting that students with a gift “could provide support to their peers” (p. 15). Adams-Byers et al. (2004) described the using of students as tutors as morally questionable as students come to school to be learners (Kanevsky, 2011) and they need their own role models (Hertzog & Bennett, 2004), instructions and appropriate curriculum to move on.
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Without relevant differentiation in the mixed-ability classroom, students reported they had a range of strategies to occupy their time, including working slowly or sitting quietly when finished, which supported by Coleman et al.’s (2015) research. These strategies were also used by students who were not enticed by the busy work or activities offered to early finishers. Repeated studies have found that gifted students experience ongoing frustration and boredom in mixed-ability classes (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Gagné, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2010). When these experiences become normalised, they can have negative social and emotional impact on the student (Adams-Byers et al., 2004) and can lead to ongoing underachievement, hiding of abilities and wasted opportunities (Gates, 2010; Reis, 2003; Vinson et al., 2002).

Only one parent felt that their child was regularly extended and allowed to work to their potential within the regular mixed-ability class. None of the students interviewed felt the same. The most common report from students was that they were sometimes given challenging work, but more often had nothing to work on once they had finished the set class work. Extension activities designed for students who finished their work early were often regarded by students to be mismatched to their interests or abilities or not worth the effort. Any task that was labelled extension was often viewed as more of the same that did not require a lot of independent thought and, therefore, was not very motivating. Through differentiation, an appropriate level of challenge ought to be available in a heterogeneous class, but repeated studies have found that gifted students experience ongoing frustration and boredom in these class structures (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Gagné, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2010). The ability to extend gifted students is often dependent on the skill and willingness of the individual teacher and rarely extends to all subject areas (Jarvis & Henderson 2015).
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Parents and students mentioned that withdrawal and ability groups had been used in the mixed-ability class to extend students who were able to demonstrate concept understanding in math and reading beyond what the class was covering. Work in these groups was centred around more difficult text and was often collaborative. This type of work held the most interest for students, but they were infrequently offered, leaving the rest of the week feeling like a long revision session. Some of these grouping arrangements were only implemented for an hour a week, for one term in the year. Both parents and students thought this grouping enhanced the students’ learning but still a part-time solution to a full-time need. This issue has been reported elsewhere in the literature for example (Bernal, 2003; Brulles & Winebrenner, 2011; Gagné, 2007). One student who had come from a smaller school felt that she was a regularly offered extension opportunities in class, but as she had no equivalent academic peers. She felt it was a double-edged sword. With extension came a sense of isolation and preoccupation with what the rest of the class was doing. She reported finding herself becoming more interested in misbehaving than improving her learning.

Academic, Social, and Emotional effects of the Program

Despite being primarily an academic program, participants deemed the social-emotional outcomes of the program as equally important. Participants found that academic success and social-emotional wellbeing were interwoven and they were problematic to separate.

Students and parents described the culture in the Opportunity Class as a place where students could find both challenge and support. Students were encouraged to ask questions, be engaged in the learning and follow their passions. Full-time academic classes can offer a culture of achievement that is not always possible in the mixed-ability classroom (Delcourt et al., 2007; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). All participants in the present study believed that
students learnt more in the full-time academic class. Students enjoyed being consistently engaged in their learning with peers who had similar abilities. Ogurlu (2016) found that ability classes offered more opportunities for robust discussions that may be more appropriate for the way gifted students learn and think. Students enjoyed not having to wait for others to catch up and enjoyed having the teacher’s attention. This finding supports the work of Kanevsky (2011) who noted that due to the pace and complex way gifted students think, they find it more motivating to work with peers who reason and work at a similar level on properly levelled material.

Parents shared that their children felt learning was more individually focussed and student driven in the Opportunity Classes, making it qualitatively different than previous provisions. School became more about them, more about their development and less about making sure the regular curriculum was covered step-by-step. Students genuinely had a greater desire to learn, and they became more creative and critical in their thinking and involved in conversations. In the study by Vidergor and Azar (2015), students felt that the goal of this type of program was to develop curiosity and interest and was given the control to do so. Through their essential makeup and design, full-time academic classes are more able to offer a challenge to students and meet their needs (Delcourt et al., 2007; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). One parent reported, and one student indicated that with the return to the mixed-ability class, students lost their drive and desire to engage fully in the learning process. They became complacent and reconciled to the structure and workings of the mixed-ability classroom.

When students are extended and are expected to work at an increased pace, they must focus their concentration and stay engaged with the work. They must develop persistence and resilience to meet challenges. One student shared that in the mixed-ability classroom she would sit back and breeze through the day knowing that she could catch up later but soon
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came to the realisation that in the Opportunity Class this was not going to be possible
anymore. Working at an appropriate level of challenge gives students an understanding that
achievement and effort are not mutually exclusive (Chessor & Whitton, 2007) and that
persistence and resilience are necessary (Gyarmathy, 2013; Reis, 2003) to keep up and reach
the new rigorous standards set by the class.

Some students did report feeling a level of stress in the Opportunity Class but felt
that it was at a healthy motivating level. Any additional stress was considered to be a
product of their own personality and was not unusual for them. These students felt that most
stresses originated from expectations for themselves and not wanting to disappoint others,
including the teacher (Guskin et al., 1986; Moulton et al., 1998). The motivating stress
students described seemed to come from working at an increased pace, working with others
of high ability and the challenge of understanding higher level concepts. Grades and scores
were not identified as a contributing factor to stress as these were only sometimes shared
and usually only with the student concerned. Scores were promoted as a personal best goal.
Students felt that the teacher assisted in keeping stress levels low by presenting work in fun
and interesting ways, been flexible with time allocations, not focussing on grades and being
available for support. Two students found the lack of grade information frustrating; one
student used it to validate they were keeping their grades at the highest level, and the other
wanted to know how far they were from the class average. The student concerned about the
class average was not re-selected for a consecutive year in the class and after returning to
the mixed-ability class was appreciative of this as on reflection she felt trying to keep up
had actually become increasingly difficult. Students did not find stress levels or difficulties
in the class reason enough to want to give up the option of being in an academic selective
class (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010).
Students in the Opportunity Class still felt connected to the rest of the school. Most students were well liked when they were in mixed-ability classes, and some were even seen as popular. This is similar to Gallagher (2015) finding that over half of gifted students in the mixed-ability class were in the top twenty-five percent of popularity and only a few were not popular. Students in the Opportunity Class did not feel labelled while in the class; they continued to have friends across many classrooms and had never hidden their academic abilities to be accepted by others. This result supports Bain and Bell (2004) conclusion that elementary students do not feel the same forced-choice dilemma as adolescents.

Within this school, it appears common for students to mostly develop friendships with students of the same gender and year level but also on shared interests and the ability to enjoy their time together. It may be a factor of the size of the school that cross-gender and cross-year level friendships were less common due to the sizable cohort of potential friends available within each gender and year level. The size of the school and rapid growth meant that most students in the mixed-ability classes did not spend consecutive years with many of the same students. The Opportunity Class was less prone to member changes as half of each Opportunity class rolled over to join the grade above or left for high school and some students were newly selected or not re-selected. This stability of members and the team culture described in the Opportunity Class afforded students the chance to spend a lot of time with other students of similar interests and therefore foster deep friendships. Parents saw a positive difference and deepening in the type of friendships their children developed once they were placed in the Opportunity Class.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis and the literature review, the research on gifted education provision is inconsistent in its findings. It is still an unresolved question if full-time academic classes or opportunity type programs are beneficial or detrimental to
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students social-emotional or academic growth. This study has taken some of the main themes from the literature and addressed them with participants by exploring student’s experiences of the BFLPE, stress, friendships and labelling. This research has demonstrated that as suggested by Marsh et al. (1995), the BFLPE can be moderated using strategies including a reduction in the competitiveness in the classroom and child-centred learning experiences which the classes at Pondview Primary School offered. The few instances of BFLPE found in this study may be attributable to gifted students comparing themselves to their pre-set expectation and not the performance of others (Gross, 1997). Students agreed that acceptance into the class did come with a sense of high expectations from parents, teachers and themselves (Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2010; Guskin et al., 1986; Moulton et al., 1998) and therefore stress, however, this was balanced by classroom practices and teacher support.

Students interviewed at Pondview Primary School all had friends before entering the program and were able to maintain them once entering the Opportunity Class due to the integration practices at the school. The choice to keep the program low-key and students as part of the main student body, contributed to the term smart class only be used as a term of affection or familiarity. Some students found a greater acceptance of themselves, a sense of belonging and deeper friendships once in the program (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Riley & White, 2016; Robinson et al., 2002; Vidergor & Azar, 2015). Most participants felt they were not treated differently from other students (Berlin, 2009) and were not labelled. Many participants did not like to use the term gifted (Perrone et al., 2010) but preferred other descriptors such as smart or hard workers (Berlin, 2009). Labelling of students from those outside the program was not considered an issue.
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Limitations of the Study

As this program evolved at one school, it was the only example of this program available; therefore, the participants are representative of the social and economic context of the area in which they live, and the findings may not be fully transferable to other schools.

Due to the relationship between a teacher and their students, it was decided that a perception of bias could arise if I, as a teacher at the school, interviewed my previous students. Thus, the perspectives of students who had experienced the program for the full four years of their primary schooling could only be acquired through conversations with their parents. Also, very few males volunteered to participate in the study with females accounting for most student and parent participants so the findings may reflect a gender bias.

This study was limited by the small number of participants and it being the only example of Opportunity Classes structured in this way. The findings are thus reflective of the culture of the school and the particular participants, and generalising findings to other contexts needs to be undertaken with caution.

Implications

A qualitative study was the only way to capture the experiences of participants. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for unplanned revelations and a visualisation of the world as seen from those within the program. This method also has its limitations in that it is subjective and relies on memory and emotional responses to personal experiences. My dual roles as a teacher in this program and the researcher gave me insight and background that assisted with the generation of deeper questions during interviews, but it may have also influenced some participants’ responses as I was known to be part of the program.
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For education policy makers, the perceived success of Pondview Primary School’s Opportunity Class program for younger moderately and mildly gifted students must be considered when guiding schools in how to cater for the full range of gifted students. If it is not possible to implement a similar program, then key ideas from the program need to be carried over into the mixed-ability classroom when it is found that these classes struggle to meet the needs of students with gifts. Provisions must not only be reserved for students who are highly gifted and talented. It must also be noted that many of the responses about mixed-ability classes related to student’s experiences of teaching and learning styles that occurred 5-10 years ago. As a teacher, over the past seven years I have seen more teachers around me receive training in gifted education and differentiation. Within some schools, classroom practices have been adjusted to incorporate these new skill sets. Lessons learnt about child-centred learning appear to be starting to have an impact.

For other big schools, the program central to this study must be considered as a potential provisional option for students with gifts. The program in its low-key format costs no more time, money or space to run than if they were placed in a mixed-ability classroom. It is the same to run as any other classroom and takes no more room or staff. For the school in this study, the results did not save the program, and therefore they cannot be used to modify it. Instead, they will stand as an advocate for an option we can return to.

Conclusions

It is thought possible to cater for mildly, and moderately gifted students in the mixed-ability class by adjusting the regular curriculum (Silverman, 2013). Parents and students in this study were mostly accepting of the provisions offered to gifted students while they were in mixed ability classes, until they joined the Opportunity Class program. After time in the Opportunity Class, many reviewed previous provisions as infrequent or ineffective,
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especially compared to the ongoing challenge they could access as members of the Opportunity Class program. Students shared that in the mixed ability classroom at Pondview Primary, as with other mixed ability classes (Gates, 2010; Reis, 2003), they were underachieving, hiding their abilities, and not receiving opportunities to work to their potential.

Participants felt that they needed the challenge offered by the full time selected ability learning environment from at least the middle of primary school. They found that the format of this program could ignite their love of learning through challenge and foster their talent development. It offered a learning environment that met their academic, social and emotional needs and was focussed on individual learning needs and student driven. By remaining low-key the program was accepted by the rest of the community and ensured students did not stand or feel isolated from the broader school community.

Parents felt that the increased work pace and the embedded culture of higher expectations set by the Opportunity Class program was implemented in a way that assisted students to move from being bored to challenged and from frustrated to content, without creating the excess pressure found by Matthews and Kitchen (2007) in their analysis of a school-within-a-school gifted program. The program at Pondview Primary did not focus on grades but on presenting learning in fun and engaging ways that only became possible with the qualitative different program offered in the Opportunity Classes.

Overwhelmingly, participants perceived time in the Opportunity Class program as a positive experience. When asked specifically about any difficulties they faced at school around the themes in the literature, specifically labelling and forced choice dilemmas (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Berlin, 2009; Gross in Porter, 2005; Riley, 2001), many
PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

participants could not recall it ever happening or even envisage it as a possibility. In addition, the unique parameters of this program being on premises and only selecting from its own population successfully addressed the issues associated with moving schools, travel time and missing former social groups raised by Chessor and Whitton (2005).

The program is not suitable for all students, with a small percentage of students finding the increased paced and more advanced concepts difficult to grasp. These students felt a sense of relief when they returned to the mixed-ability classes but also described their year in the program as their best year at schooling. Even though students who were not reselected for the program experienced some detrimental effects on their academic and personal self-confidence (Chessor & Whitton, 2007) they also felt these were higher than before the program.

This study was unable to answer if the program assisted students to be effective members of society or even the degree of influence the program had on students’ academic progress. Most participants admitted that they had not reflected on the long-term effects of the program but rather on the immediate, especially the differences in student’s emotional response to school. Participants did feel that in the Opportunity Class, students received an equity of time, attention, success and opportunities to be creative in their learning, as stipulated in The Melbourne Declaration of Education Goals (2008). Participants did not feel the mixed ability classroom offered the same opportunities, level of engagement or relevance.

When asked, Pondview Primary parents and students felt that the Opportunity Class Program should remain in its current form as it seemed to be working. The only suggestion was to reduce class sizes and include homework, both of which were not possible under the
PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

School’s current policies and guidelines. The support for the program indicated that the Opportunity Class program is either effective and meeting expectations or is more effective than other provisions students had access to or previously experienced. During the writing of this research, the program was discontinued. Parents were not informed prior to the beginning of the year and as with all aspects of the program, this was done in a low-key way, as was parents public expressions of their disappointment.

In part, this research answered the call from the Australian Parliament Senate Inquiry (2001) to research fully selective classes. It is expected that this research will add to the discussion on the value of full-time ability grouping and open up the discussion to include younger students and those whose gifts are not demonstrated in the highest percentiles. It is vital that the wider research community finds other schools that have adopted similar practices to provide for their gifted population. Through further research, it may be possible to discover if the results are specific to this local population or if specific aspects of the program were able to counter some of the issues found in the literature such as BFLPE, friendships and labelling.
References


PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS


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Roeper Review, 29(2), 77-82. doi:10.1080/02783190709554389


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56(2), 90-104. doi:10.1177/0016986212442568


PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS
Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.


PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS


PERCEPTIONS OF FULL-TIME CLASSES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS


Stoeger, H., Steinbach, J., Obergriessler, S., & Matthes, B. (2014). What is more important for fourth-grade primary school students for transforming their potential into
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achievement: The individual or the environmental box in multidimensional conceptions of giftedness? *High Ability Studies, 25*(1), 5-21.


doi:10.1080/02783193.2015.1047549

doi:10.1080/02783193.2012.627550


Appendix

Appendix A: Overview of Pondview Primary School

The Opportunity Class at Pondview Primary School has a number of features that vary from many other full-time selective classes. The table below describes some of the features of this class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pondview Primary</th>
<th>Table of Features of School and Opportunity Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Government Primary School in Western Australian Urban area. ICSEA 1035-1055 Years K-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Catchment</td>
<td>Students only selected from school’s local intake area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Location</td>
<td>The classroom that houses this program are within a comprehensive primary school and are identical to the other classrooms that surround it. It outwardly looks the same as every other room in the school and is numbered for its location only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Structure</td>
<td>Two full-time, multi-aged, academically select classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior Opportunity Class Yr. 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior Opportunity Class Yr. 5/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each year level has approximately 5 classes. All other classes are mixed-ability, and some are multi-aged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Size</td>
<td>Classes filled to capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior Class 24 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior Class 32 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-age grouping (M.A.G)</td>
<td>Each class has two-year levels. The classes have historically had a close to even mix or year levels and gender in each class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Students are only selected for a one-year period at a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Selection Strategies</td>
<td>Identification Profile completed by Teacher. Includes positive and negative gifted indicators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Off-level testing of Math and Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative writing sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Previous Standardised test results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Verbal Reasoning test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical and Creative Thinking Tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Nominations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Objectives</td>
<td>Junior: To give students who show potential to be gifted and talented in at least one academic domain the opportunity to develop their talents with like-minded peers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Perceptions of Full-Time Classes for Gifted Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Senior</strong></td>
<td>To continue to develop the talent and skills students already have. To teach them efficient ways of problem-solving and prepare them for academic high school selective programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels of Giftedness</strong></td>
<td>Students are considered to be mild to moderately gifted. They are approximately 10% of the school population. Gifts need to be evident, but talent may not be displayed. Twice exceptional and gifted in some academic domains only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Qualifications</strong></td>
<td>Needs to have at least an interest in Gifted Education. Previous experience preferred.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Other Provisions Within the Opportunity Class: Strategies employed/** | - Pretests, especially for mandated national curriculum concepts  
  - Compacting the Curriculum  
  - Telescoping the Curriculum  
  - Whole Year level acceleration of individual students  
  - Cluster grouping  
  - Topics and presentation methods of choice  
  - National Competitions as part of the enrichment program |
| **Cultural Mix**                           | English as an Additional Language is 32% of the school population. The Cultural mix in the program is reflective of the local community. |
| **Interaction with the other students**    | Students are fully involved with the school community. They go on excursions together, have sports and assemblies together and have the same teachers for specialist subjects such as science and music. |
| **Funding**                                | The classroom is allocated the same level of funding as all other classes. |
Appendix B: Pondview Primary School Gate Program

PONDVIEW PRIMARY SCHOOL GATE PROGRAM OUTLINE 2013

The GATE program is facilitated in the middle and upper primary years through Opportunity Classes or cluster grouping, and in the early childhood years through withdrawal and in-class extension.

The Opportunity Classes curriculum follows the policies and guidelines of the school and encompasses the school’s shared pedagogy of differentiation and child centred learning. There is an emphasis in the class that the students are firstly a member of Pondview Primary School, then a member of their cohorts and finally a member of their class, little emphasis is placed on the reason they are selected to work together.

The following differences may be expected in an Opportunity Class:

• Compaction, deeper exploration and extension of the curriculum.
• Greater independence for students to direct, manage, negotiate and evaluate their learning.
• Lessons involving critical thinking and metacognition about thinking.
• A greater quantity of real life challenges.
Appendix C: Parent Background Survey

To help ensure that we have a fair representative of parents from the school, it would be appreciated if you could fill in the following information. This information will only be used for this research. This form is anonymous.

1. What is your age?
   - □ 25 or under
   - □ 26-40
   - □ 41-55
   - □ 56 or older

2. What is your gender?
   - □ Female
   - □ Male

3. How would you classify yourself?
   - □ Australian
   - □ Indigenous or Aboriginal
   - □ Middle Eastern
   - □ Asian
   - □ European
   - □ Multiracial
   - □ Would rather not say
   - □ Other

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   - □ High school or equivalent
   - □ TAFE
   - □ Bachelor’s degree
   - □ Postgraduate degree
   - □ Other

5. How many children under 16 years old live in your household?
   - □ 1
   - □ 2
   - □ 3
   - □ 4 or more

6. How many of your children have been members of an Opportunity Class
   - □ 1
   - □ 2

7. How many of your children are still too young to join an “Opportunity Class” at the school.
   - □ 0
   - □ 1
   - □ 2

8. If your child was a member of the “Opportunity Class” and has now left this primary school, what school do they now attend?
   - □ Still at primary school
   - □ High School - regular classes
   - □ High School - GATE program
Appendix D: Student Background Survey

To help ensure that we have a fair representative of students, it would be appreciated if you could fill in the following information. This information will only be used for this research. This form is anonymous and will not have your name.

1. What is your age?

          

2. What is your gender?

☐ Female
☐ Male

3. How would you classify yourself?

☐ Australian
☐ Indigenous or Aboriginal
☐ Middle Eastern
☐ Asian
☐ European
☐ Multiracial
☐ Would rather not say
☐ Other __________________________

4. What language(s) do you speak at home?

☐ English

          

5. How many children under 16 years old live in your household, including yourself?

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4 or more

6. Have any of your brothers or sisters also been in an Opportunity Class?

☐ Yes
☐ No

7. How many of your siblings are still too young to join an “Opportunity Class” at the school.

☐ 0
☐ 1
☐ 2 or more

8. If you have now left primary school, what type of school/class do you attend?

☐ None, still at primary school
Appendix E: Focus Group Questions

Questions for Parent Focus Group Session

Topic: Parent and Student Perception of Selective Classes at their School.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am interested in your experience of the selective Opportunity Class classes at this school and will be recording the discussion and taking some notes to ensure I gain as much insight from our time as possible. Everyone’s experience is different, so please feel free to share your point of view.

Q1. What is your experience of the selection process?
Q2. What do you think is the purpose of the classes?
Q3. What have your children gained by being in these classes?
Q4. Have they had any issues with being in the selective classes?
Q5. Has your child made any comparisons between their time in a regular and a selective classroom?
Q6. How could the school improve the way they provide for their gifted students?
Q7. If another school was to consider this type of program, what should they be aware of, what are the most important things for them to do?
Appendix F: Interview Questions

Questions for Student Interview Sessions

**Topic: Parent and Student Perception of Selective Classes at their School.**

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today. I am interested in your experience of the selective Opportunity Class classes at this school and will be recording the discussion and taking some notes to ensure I gain as much insight from our time as possible. Everyone’s experience is different, so please feel free to share your point of view.

Q1. What is your experience of the selection process?
Q2. What do you think is the purpose of the classes?
Q3. What have you gained by being in these classes?
Q4. Have there been any issues with being in the selective classes?
Q5. What is your experience of being in a regular classroom?
Q6. How could the school improve the way it provides for its gifted students?
Q7. If another school was to consider this type of program, what should they be aware of, what are the most important things for them to do?
## Appendix G: Participant Background Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Averages *</th>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Parent Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Participants+</td>
<td>11 (29%)</td>
<td>24 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender

- Female 10 18
- Male 1 5

### Age

10-14 26-55

### Ethnic Identification**

- Australian 66% 55% 57%
- Oceania (excl Australia) 3.7%
- African or the Middle East 5%
- Asian
  - South East Asia 6.5%
  - Southern and Central Asia 3.4%
  - North East Asia 1.2% 11.1% 45% 26%
- European 13.4% 13%
- Americas 0.8% 0.4%

### Language spoken at home

- English only 64%
- English and other 18%
- Other only 15.8% 18%

### Students in Opportunity Classes

- Past or current 1 student 18
### Perceptions of Full-Time Classes for Gifted Students

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 or more students</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings have also been in Opportunity Classes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Potentially (not old enough)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more children accepted into classes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Current schooling

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Still in Primary School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Regular Classes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- GATE or AEP class</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Education Level of parent participants

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE (Technical Qual)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- + One participant did not fill out the background survey
- ** Local area information is based on country of birth. Student and parent information is based on how individuals classify themselves e.g. Australian or Asian.
**Glossary**

**Ability Grouping** – “In general, ability grouping implies some means of grouping students for instruction by ability or achievement” (Slavin, 1987, p. 294).

**ACARA (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority)** – Is the authorised, independent statutory authority who has undertaken to implement a national curriculum, assessment, and reporting system for Australia with the backing of the Australian Government.

**BFLPE** – Big-fish-little-pond effect - Where students’ belief in their academic ability diminishes when they are placed with other students of academic strength.

**Differentiation** - Curriculum differentiation is the modification of the regular curriculum to meet the learning needs of different students.

**DMGT** – Gagne’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent. The DMGT is proposed as a comprehensive framework of talent development; its components subsume all significant causes of talent emergence (Gagné, 2007)

**Enrichment** - Activities or learning that will enrich the learning experience. This can be based on individual student interests and do not have to be directly related to whole class or set curriculum learning.

**Extension** – Academic content and lessons that extend the curriculum or learning occurring in the main class.

**Focus Class** – see selective classes.

**Full-time Ability Grouping** – An ability group that makes up a class. The students stay together for all lessons, every day, and all year.

**G.A.T.E (Gifted and Talented Education)** – Any adjustments that are made to standard education practices or procedures with the specific goal of teaching gifted and talented students.

**Gifted Education** – see GATE
Gifted – the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011, p. 3)

IGAT – (IG) Intellectually Gifted and (AT) Academically Talented (Gagné, 2007)

Moderately Gifted – top 1% of gifted students. 1 in 100 (Gagné, 2007)

Mildly Gifted – top 10% of gifted students. 1 in 10 (Gagné, 2007)

Opportunity Class – The name used by the school in this study for its selective/focus classes.

PEAC (Primary Extension and Challenge program) – A half day, pull-out program for the top 2.5% of tested year 5-7s. This program runs in Western Australia.

Selective Classes – (also referred to as a focus class in the literature.) A class in which every class member is chosen or selected based on a set of criteria. For this paper, it only refers to academically gifted and talented students.

Talented – “The outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities,” with talent emerging “from ability as a consequence of the student’s learning experience,” (Department of Education Western Australia, 2011, p. 3).