Vassar College

Friendship: The Super Power of High School and its Effects on Academic Performance

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in Education and Sociology

by

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**Preface- Personal Connection**

The inspiration for the topic of this thesis began with a feeling relatable to most when thinking back on fond memories: nostalgia. I was walking around my college campus on a random afternoon thinking about how thankful I was for my current group of friends, but at the same time, I was sad about how distant I was from the people I grew up with especially because of the role they played in making me who I am today. As I thought more about it, the fissure between my friends and I arose as we entered high school because of how separated we were during the school day. With even more classes, more students, and varying levels of classes; I was isolated from my friend group in middle school that had life changing influence on me and slowly became less close to them over my four years of high school. Reflecting back on the rift that grew between us, I could not help but think about the classes I was in and how I was able to make advancements academically, yet I had little access to the friendships I cherished so much. I made new friends in these classes and did not consider why I had such limited access to my old friend group years later. It made me think about how the people around us in high school shape how we perform in school and how my primary friends changed along with my academic goals cohesively.

These thoughts made me realize how friendship and academics are much more related and important than the United States associates them. The reason I am sharing from my experience is not just to explain the dampening of friendships in high school but also the beauty of the new ones I made. Not only did I make new friends, but I was provided with a community of people who helped my journey academically and helped me get to where I am today, in college as an aspiring educator, in a totally different way. But I knew that there was a lot to be explored between friendship and academics because of my high school experience. This thesis is

inspired by how I navigated high school as I realized how the education system can considerably influence who a student's friends are through their four years of high school and how that impacts their academic lives. I did not know what I would find through writing my thesis, but I knew that people love to be nostalgic about their time in high school and their friendships.

# Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Friends can be the closest people in our lives, even transcending familial ties in many instances. Depending on who you ask, the impact of friendships can be limitless. You cannot talk about friendship and be hard pressed not to mention school as many people make some of their most meaningful friendships throughout their educational years. High school in particular is a time that some people reflect back on and associate many of their fondest memories with their friends. Friends in high school are often special because of the abundance of time spent together, the age during that time frame, and the varied influence they have on each other. This thesis will address the latter: how friends influence one another in public high schools and how those friendships shape student academic pathways.

The relationship between friendship and academics has been observed from many different perspectives; it is most relevant to education but has a lot of relevance to the sociological world of academia since it provides insight into how a student navigates their school with their peers and how these relationships shape their actions. The most researched facet of the relationship is how friends impact a student's grades in the classroom, but there are so many more impacts of friends on a student like how they affect a student's sense of belonging, their comfort with collaborating in the classroom, and their feelings about school (Faircloth and Hamm 2005). The background characteristics of friends- such as where they are from, how they act, what they like to do outside of school, their cultures- also play a role in shaping a student's academic performance, connection to school, grades, and study habits.

Many research studies on the relationship between academics and friendship were quantitative studies where researchers used student surveys to reach their conclusions. This study

will go a different route from those quantitative studies and draw from student narratives collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Friendship is a part of life that is quite special, and interviews provide rich descriptions and deep insights into the different facets of friendship and what makes them so noteworthy while still observing how friends influence a student's academic performance. This point of view is necessary in this field of study. And this paper does reveal friends' impacts in an entirely different light as hearing people's testimonies regarding their friends' influences beyond academic achievement gives greater context to how friends constantly affect each other in school. Regardless of whether or not friends affect a student's academic life in the classroom, this thesis does reveal how and why students impact one another. This study can shift people's mindsets about how the U.S. education system affects its students and how they interact with each other. This study also indicates why friendships are so monumental on a high schooler's educational experience through interviews and how these relationships help determine how a student navigates their expectations in the classroom.

This work will also address the structure of high schools and how it shapes the friendships formed in high school along with the overarching attitude a student has towards school. The structural issues of public high schools, like the inequality of funding and lack of resources depending on the school district, is an avenue of research that has been heavily written and studied on (Oakes 2005, American University 2020), but not in terms of how it affects the way students make friends in school. There are major differences between students and how they feel about school, and the interviews for this thesis will get into the specifics into why certain students feel different sets of emotions when it comes to their high school experience and how the structures of their high schools played a role in their feelings about school. Combined with the fact that the friendships made in high school are not usually correlated with the different

structures in schools like advanced programs and social climate, this thesis will illuminate how much the structures of public high school directly relate to the friendships made.

The intent of this thesis is not to paint one type of high school experience as better than another, but a telling of former student's experiences with their friends and the varying relationships they had with their high school's friendship climate. The interviewees who participated in this thesis all had such compelling stories and reflections about their time in public high schools. These differences are necessary to tell the fluctuating ways in which students felt and experienced high school. While reading this work, I recommend that the reader consider how interviewees' differing stories give a unique perspective from one another and add to the growing topic of friendships and their impact on academic performance. The quotes provided throughout this thesis are directly from the interviewees and are left unmodified to keep their accounts as authentic as possible. These quotes are sprinkled throughout the paper with the intent to take readers into the perspectives of these former high school students. I hope readers will consider the many factors that shaped an interviewee's friendship and how these factors shifted how they operated throughout their high school environment. Some quotes from interviewees may stick out or be relatable to a reader, and to this I say, good! This is an academic paper, but it is written with the intent to characterize something as special as friendship in depth and tell the stories of the interviewees kind enough to tell their truth. Connecting to an interviewee's sentiment is not essential to understand their narrative or the narrative of the paper as a whole, but it will enhance a reader's understanding of how friendships materialize and shape a student's experience in high school. Before moving on to my literature review, I close this chapter with the research question that this thesis will be addressing and that guided my work throughout the process:

- **How does the circle of school friends, attending the same public high school, affect the academic performance of students?**

  - **What are the key factors of that friendship?**

**Chapter 2**

LITERATURE REVIEW

  In this literature review, I will examine literature relating to the focus of my thesis, with the research question referenced above. I will review literature regarding friendship and academics, starting from the purpose of education and friendship, then taking particular interest in literature that relates to friendships affecting academics. There will be a focus on expectation setting and the life trajectories of students based on their friendships to provide more context to how friendships and the settings surrounding them affect their school experience; these focuses will be expanded in depth through the analytical chapters of this thesis. Throughout this literature review, I point out what certain studies and readings have accomplished but also make it clear how my thesis brings a new perspective regarding the topic of friendship and academic performance with focuses on structure and academic motivations.

*Friendship*

  A friend is a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection (Tajudeen 2024). The concept of friendship has been discussed for thousands of years as literature on the topic dates back to famous ancient Greek philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who all wrote about friendship and the significant role it played in everyone's lives (Annas 1977). They all had different ideas on what friendship could be and its purpose, but they all concluded that friends were important to people's happiness and livelihood (Smith Pangle 2008). Their emphasis on friendship in their writing has continued to be relevant in society, as sixty-one percent of U.S. adults today say that having close friends is essential for people to live a fulfilling life (Goddard 2023). Friendships have scientifically proven benefits like protecting us

against mental health issues throughout our lifespan, changing the way we respond to stress positively like completing a tough task, or even finding providing brain activity responsible for motivation, reward, identity, and sensory process (Abrams 2023).

Friends being so pivotal in adult lives originates from learning the dynamics, benefits, and enjoyment of friendships while growing up in school. From K-12 education in the United States, children go to school for about seven-eight hours a day and spend these hours with their classmates who eventually become their friends; half of a student's day for 12 years consists of spending time, interacting, and learning with their friends in classes. The impact these friends can have on a child's life and education is undeniable; they can shape student interests and be role models as children navigate their educational lives. These educational lives are shaped by friendships and additionally, are heavily influenced by what the United States deems important for a student's education altogether and this educational purpose will be the focus of the next section of this literature review.

*The Purpose of Education*

Education's fundamental purpose is to teach students and have them learn about many different subjects and interests, and through this education, students not only grow intelligently but socially as well. In John Dewey's *My Pedagogical Creed,* he wrote about what education should be and the potential it has to change the United States. His initial observation was that an individual at birth forms an unconscious education from their surroundings, and when they go into the education system, this is where their intellectual and moral ideals should be built upon (Dewey 1897). He argued that there were two sides to the educational process- one being psychological and the other sociological (Dewey 1897). Psychologically, a student should have the chance to learn about their unique interests and ideologies throughout their educational

experience (Dewey 1897). The sociological side Dewey references really hones in on the relevance of my thesis work. Dewey emphasized the necessity for children to have social relationships in school so society can be an organic union of individuals, and that the individual is important but having social interactions in school feeds into their future interactions as adults (Dewey 1897). Whether it was Dewey's direct intention or not, he advocated for friendship in schools. His inadvertent stress on the power that friends and relationships have in school settings, and the effects that these relationships can have even after their education finishes is why the friendship of students in the education system is the focal point of this thesis.

Since Dewey's book on what education's purpose is for students, authors have addressed friendship in education with much more direct intent. C.S. Lewis wrote about how different friends bring out various aspects of friendship, such as actions, intellect, emotions, and humor (Ruehl 2018). Bringing out different elements of each other is the purpose of friendship, and school is the perfect place to foster this relationship. Students do everything with each other and that includes growing emotionally and intellectually. In Mary Hunt's writing pertaining to education and friendship, she mentioned that love can enhance educational relationships as students would benefit from uplifting each other (Ruehl 2018). As society has evolved, authors have taken notice of the power that friendship can have in education for students. Friendships are influential in all aspects of life, and academics are no different. My thesis reveals how friendship can directly impact how students feel about school and focus on school with new perspectives and outlooks via interviews; friends in school can have enormous influence on a student's takeaways from their K-12 educational experience and that relationship deserves more attention.

When talking about friendship, community is built through these relationships and is emphasized in a school setting. bell hooks' *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope (2003)*

objective is to teach how to build community in our nation and, by doing so, become a more anti-racist nation. Throughout her book, there are many instances in which hooks (2003) refers to friendship as a method to build community and prevent racial conflict. During a conversation with her friend Ron, he spoke about the purpose of friendships in school: "Combined with commitment to community, is needed if we are to find unity within diversity. These are all essential qualities that must be cultivated when we seek to build friendship, partnership—inside the academy, in public schools" (p. 117). A community cannot thrive without flourishing friendships, and Ron noted that communities need to establish these relationships in schools. Friendships hold a lot of power and influence in our society, and hooks recognized that they have value just as much in school as out of it. Friendship can solve societal issues that seemingly can never be solved as it is the source of people seeing each other as equals. While these friendships cannot form overnight, schools are an ideal avenue to develop these crucial relationships over time. How these relationships form and develop bears significant priority to what my thesis uncovers through my interviews. With growing attention to friendship in the classroom and the potential effects it has, more studies have arisen on the relationship.

*Friendship and Academic Outcomes*

The relationship between friendship and academic achievement has been studied with much more focus for the past couple of decades, both internationally and domestically. A Chinese study from 2023 sought to discover how impactful student-peer relationships were, compared to student-parent relationships or student-teacher relationships, by surveying over 58,000 thirteen-to-sixteen-year-old students in urban areas. This study measured the effects that friendship had on the grades students had over a three-year span. Yet, it concluded more than anything that students have the most influence on each other during the school day, whether

academically or beyond, as the constricts of a classroom can influence a student's personality or behavior habits (Yu et al. 2023). Similarly, a study in Spain (2016) measured peer acceptance and its effects on students in the classroom through a survey of 450 10th grade students. Like the Chinese study, its goal was to explore how peer acceptance can predict academic achievement e.g. their state examination scores, but the Spanish study also recognized how peer acceptance affects a student past their test scores. Students accepted in a peer group were more comfortable being social and had more emotional support than those who did not have a peer group; this trend was applicable to their academic and social lives (Gallardo et al. 2016).

While both studies focused on friendship and academic achievement measured by grades or test scores, they acknowledge how friends impact students beyond these academic measures. School friends are more than just predictors of the grades you earn; they determine how you feel about school, what you focus on in school, and even what you do after school. These studies are insightful, but they do not specify why these friendships are so impactful on a student's school experience. There are mentions of a sense of belonging for students but no elements of what make these friendships so special. My thesis will include the academic lifestyle that people had in high school, but more so on the everyday factors of these friendships that influenced their school life beyond just the grades they received.

*The Social Influence of Academics*

The previous studies mentioned in this literature review have been backing the idea that academic success can be a predictor of someone's social assimilation, but Sociologist Grace Kao's varying research concluded that researchers should look past solely test scores when considering the relationship of friendship and academic success. In one particular study, Kao had a national sample of over 90,000 adolescents with four waves from 1994-2008 focused on

friendship, race, and romance, and tracked individuals over time as over 15,000 students were re-interviewed with each wave (Cummings 2019). In an interview about her work, Kao spoke about what might be missed when focusing solely on graduation rates or test scores:

"I think it's really important to go beyond test scores and consider social integration: whether or not kids make friends and are accepted by their peers. In other work I've done, we found that Asian-American men are more likely to be left out of the dating market. This is contrary to what social demographers would expect because Asian-American men have high levels of education and income. They should do well on the dating and marriage markets, but they don't. Black women also don't do so well. We can't just measure assimilation by whether some groups have higher test scores than others. That doesn't tell the whole story."

Kao points out that measuring a student's academic performance does not always predict how assimilated they are socially. While many studies have found that students who get good grades are more likely to have steady friends or friend group, that does not necessarily always hold true (Cummings 2019). Kao's conclusion was based on a fourteen-year span and noticed how the relationship of friendship and academic performance in school had different impacts socially depending on the individual. There are many nuances of friendship that are explored from my interviews that correlate to Kao's findings. During high school, students can have excellent grades but not truly feel accepted by their friend group while students who struggle in the classroom could have a plethora of friends who they feel close with.

In some studies on friendship and academic performance, academic success or struggle can be the leading factor in how friendships form. In Jennifer Flashman's 2011 American study surveying 144 schools on academic achievement's effects on friendship, her research found that

in urban areas high-achieving students strive for high-achieving friends, and low-achieving students tend to befriend other low-achieving students. Her research also revealed that in rural areas, students could not be picky about choosing their friends because the pool of potential friends was so small, and students tended to have grown up with each other; academic achievement had little effect on the friendships made in these rural areas because of the limited school population (Flashman 2011). A Netherlands study in 2019 with more of a focus on popularity had almost the exact same findings as Flashman and referenced how the social hierarchy of these schools prevented low-popularity students from befriending popular students who were successful in the classroom (Laninga-Wijnen et al. 2019). Again, these studies were survey-based, but they did discover intriguing facets of friendships regarding popularity and academics as predictors for the friends a student will make and how.

My thesis adds to these studies as the interview methodology allowed me to get in-detail descriptions of the landscapes of each individual's high school. These studies reference that some schools have more of a social focus on academics, in which academic performance has direct correlation with a student's place in their school's social hierarchy, and how that could play a significant role in shaping and finding friendships. In my interviews, I gauge how meaningful academics were to the social climate at an individual's high school and how a student personally navigated friendships and their academics. Throughout my interviews, my interviewees mention when they had friends they grew up with and stayed friends with leading up to and during high school, and how that affected their social interactions and academic performance. Friendship has its impacts on academic performance, but it exceeds just performance as friends can shape the expectations you have for school or life and can be a determiner of a student's future for more than just their high school years.

*Expectation Setting*

While friends are at the forefront of this study in relation to the classroom setting, the expectations set from a student's high school affects how friend groups perceive their value to their schools and how they perform in the classroom. In 2016, Ming-Te Wang and Jessica L. Degol were interested in school climates and how they impacted student outcomes both in and outside the classroom. They looked at a multitude of studies related to the academic, behavioral, psychological, and social impacts based on schools' climates. When focusing on the academic impacts from a school's climate, the researchers noted how higher achieving schools tend to emphasize the importance of commitment to high academic standards and how student perceptions of a school's mastery goal structure have been linked to greater academic achievement through positive academic self-concept (Wang and Deogol). Wang and Degol also noted how a school's ability to challenge students to measure their successes based on individual improvement rather than performance standards will most likely produce students with greater intrinsic interest in learning and greater achievement. All throughout this study, there are very minimal references to how friends play a role in a school's climate or how friend groups interpret a school's performance standards. This study references how a student's community affects academics but only focuses on student-teacher and student-parent relationships. Friendship is an outlook that this study does not consider, but the effects of a school's climate directly relates to friendships as they solidify a student's belief and thoughts about attending and participating in school. The study also drew from 92% of surveys and 8% interviews, like previous studies mentioned in this literature review, there is a perspective missing from these studies that my thesis will provide. Although my thesis will be framed through the lens of friendship, structural

factors and expectation setting are an undertone of the interviews conducted in this thesis and will be examined in the analysis chapters of this study.

AP classes and programs must be mentioned when talking about the structural impact a school has on students and the friendships they make. Robert R. Bryan and Shawn M. Glynn conducted a study in 2011 on high school students and how AP classes impacted their motivation. Bryan and Glynn's study has such a high level of relevance to the topic of my thesis as it had 288 students write essays about their motivations to learn science and conducted interviews with 28 students with varying levels of motivation. The researchers provided quotes from three different students, each ranging from high motivation to low motivation. It was apparent from the high and moderate motivation that they came into high school with prior knowledge about why their education was important and how they knew that succeeding in the classroom would promote a better future for themselves while the student with low motivation referenced how they thought science was boring and did not see the point in learning it; the student also talked about how they like to learn more hands on and felt like their learning experience was rushed and provided very little confidence for them on assignments or tests (Bryan and Glynn 2011). The low motivated student's sentiment on preferring a more hands-on and interactive experience in the classroom was not much different from the opinions of the moderate and high motivated students, but it was apparent that their expectations for themselves and those around them in their AP classes gave these motivated students the focus and confidence necessary to excel in the classroom. The expectations students are given in high school heavily influence how motivated they are and how they will perform in the classroom, along with these expectations are their friends who are also placed in different levels of classes with them. The methodology of Bryan and Glynn's work is strongly related to the methods of my

thesis as their interviews played a large role in the findings of their study and conveyed the specifics that an interview has the capability to reveal unlike a survey or questionnaire. These findings on the motivation of students becomes extremely pertinent to this thesis as the research reveals how educational structures can determine how much a student is motivated and puts forth effort into succeeding academically.

*Friendship's Effects On Life Trajectories*

As referenced throughout this chapter, friendship is an aspect of life that never goes away and continues to influence our lives. There is an abundance of literature on the after-effects of friendship on people's futures. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* by Jay MacLeod is a very well-known ethnographic of social inequalities and how friend groups with different goals in low-income neighborhoods while growing up can shape their adult lives. MacLeod's ethnography follows two distinct friend groups: the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers. The Hallway Hangers were a group of predominantly white teenagers who focused on their time outside of school and engaged in violence and drug abuse, while the Brothers were primarily black and Latino teenagers who concentrated on sports and their education (MacLeod 2009). MacLeod started this ethnography in 1983 and checked back in throughout the adulthood of each group in 1995 and 2005-07. The Brothers, on average, ended up with more consistent jobs and lifestyles compared to the Hallway Hangers, and their mindsets from high school played a significant role in these results (MacLeod 2009). There are many similar ethnographies and books written on teenage friend groups in low-income areas to emphasize the social inequalities that our country has; these books usually focus on the friendships of these students and how they affect their futures, rarely are these pieces of literature written with the intent of having positive outlooks. In MacLeod's work, there is clearly a 'good'

group and a 'trouble-making group' to expose the consequences of the United States' social inequities; my interviews will not hold any positive or negative bias towards the effects that friends have on each other, but I am hoping to expose the beauty of friendship regardless of how 'successful' people's academics or futures were. The most powerful part of MacLeod's work was the connections made to the different boys throughout the novel; I want my work to evoke this feeling as well through the intimacy built with my interviewees. The ability to connect your readers to what they are reading like MacLeod did will elevate my thesis' findings expeditiously as the process of the work would evolve into something more than just a study.

**Chapter 3**

METHODS

*Reasoning and Recruiting for Interviews*

Picking interviews as the primary methodology for my thesis came from reading prior studies on friendship and academic performance; most of the research I read used surveys and other quantitative methods to measure the impacts of friendship on academics. While reading these quantitative research articles and studies, I realized that there was a personal perspective missing throughout these readings. It enlightened the focus of my thesis work as I realized I wanted friendship to be the focal point of my study. I knew the characteristics of friendship had so many different facets and angles to explore that would help reveal a student's relationship with school. Interviews are such a telling form of research methodology because interviewees can interpret questions significantly differently from one another and the conclusions drawn from one's answer varies considerably from each other. Interviews were the perfect methodology to choose as I could listen to people's educational experiences in high school and the factors of friendship that defined their time in high school.

Recruiting for the interviewees of my thesis started with me thinking of people who were close to me and had a unique perspective to tell. Convenience sampling, a process of data collection from a population that is close at hand and easily accessible to the researcher (Rahi 2017), was my primary source of sampling as I felt interviews as personable as I intended them to be should not be random. I did not want my interviews to all be based in my hometown of Chicago though, so I only recruited three friends from the area for interviews. My goal was to have an interviewee pool from different parts of the country and walks of life to achieve the widest variety of educational experiences and friendships. Initially, I thought that doing the interviews over Zoom and Facetime would be an adjustment as I was worried about getting the

transcript for these conversations; but Otter.ai was the perfect resource to record the interviews and more importantly, provide a transcript for them. These transcripts were critical for data analysis and reflecting on the intricate details of my interviewees' answers. Something that I found surprising before my first interview was how nervous I was, even though I was interviewing somebody I had known for years. After reflecting on these nerves, I realized it was more the culmination of me worrying about wasting all the hard work I had done up until starting the interview process than doing the actual interview itself. Once the first interview started flowing, all my worries washed away, and the interview process was no longer anxiety-inducing. Each interview went smoother than the next as I got more comfortable and kept improving on making the process more conversational than formal.

After my initial three interviews with personal friends from home, I reflected on anyone else willing to have an interview with me and from an area other than Chicago. My first step in obtaining a diverse selection came as I was getting food from one of my college's dining halls; I started talking with one of the workers who always conversated with me, and it hit me that he had a story to tell, and I could be the one to provide a platform for him. On the spot, I asked him if he would like to do an interview for my thesis and he excitedly answered "yes!" A couple of days later, I saw the worker I interviewed, and he mentioned that someone else was interested in doing the interview. This recommendation kickstarted the method of recruiting for the rest of the interviews: the snowball method (Rahi 2017), in which I asked interviewees if they had other people they thought would be interested and willing to sit down for an interview.

Another aspect of recruiting interviewees was having a balanced range of people who attended college straight out of high school and those who went directly into the workforce or other passions. This focus spawned from the fear of having skewed results and similar high

school experiences. Having a research pool with people holding the same characteristics does not add as much to the research on friends and academic performance as having a diverse pool does. My college provided a couple of interviewees as they fit the mold for students who went to college right out of high school and were easy to get hold of and schedule times to meet, but I ensured not to have all my college attending/attended interviewees come strictly from my college and was able to gather interviews from people that attended two other colleges. Being able to compare the different ways that friends of college and non-college interviewees' experiences played a role in shaping a student's high school educational experience is monumental in uncovering the significance of the relationship. After my first interview, I realized none of the questions let interviewees dive into the specific attributes of their friends that made these friendships so special. I quickly made an adjustment and added a question to my interview protocol, asking if there was a friendship that stood out during their time in high school to the interviewees: "what about the friendship made it so influential?" Having direct questions about the details of their relationships allowed interviewees to expand on their most impactful high school friendships and distinguishing features.

Below is a graph to familiarize and provide some background information on the interviewees for this study:

| Pseudonym | Attended College | State of their Public High School |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Reed | No | Illinois |
| Jared | Yes | California |
| Victor | No | Illinois |

| Natasha | Yes | Texas |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sabina | Yes | Kansas |
| Bruce | No | New York |
| Bianca | Yes | Illinois |

This graph represents the mix of experiences I wanted to obtain for this thesis: differing experiences from states all around the country and varying plans after their high school careers. The experience of each interviewee is so distinctive from one another, and it is shown through their interviews and talking through their high school lives. Later in this thesis, the specific details of each interviewee's high school experiences and friendships are thoroughly examined and explored deeper[1]. This graph is an essential introduction to the interviewees who are the heart of this study as they are the primary source of research and discussion. I hope this graph helps readers connect to the people in this study and give context to the high school experiences these interviewees reference throughout the analytical chapters. This section covered how I recruited people in this study and the next section of this chapter expresses how the interview process was managed and conducted.

*Data Collection Methods*

My highest priority in forming the questions for my interview and the process in its entirety was to reduce bias. I never framed any parts of my interviews with leading questions or

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[1] There is context provided for the current lives of the interviewees in the analytical chapters

with an answer that I was looking to hear, as friendship can impact people in so many ways. Mitigating bias entirely in qualitative research is impossible, but recognizing potential biases and striving to avoid them ensures that the insights genuinely reflect participants' experiences and perspectives (Lemire 2025). To help remove bias from my interviewees, I framed my interviews through a conversational lens with open-ended questions[2], instead of just asking the set of questions I had written down and only sticking to them, to relieve the pressures of feeling like they had to respond a certain way. These questions started light and slowly elevated to be more personal for the interviewees, then the questions lightened up to finish the interviews; ordering the questions in this fashion was done to ease my interviewees into the conversation and build trust with me as an interviewer before I asked more vulnerable questions. Before getting into the questions, I made sure to preface with my interviewees that I wanted the interview to feel like a conversation and encouraged them to talk to me as they would normally. Setting this tone for my interviews was vital, in not only getting the interviewee and I on the same page but also having interviews with a natural flow. Through this flow, I let my interviewees co-lead our conversations and perceive the questions with little input from myself, and this framing allowed them to answer my questions exclusively from one another as their interpretations varied depending on their high school experience.

After my participants agreed to take part in my interviews, I gave them a rundown on how the interview would go and explained their rights as an interviewee by providing them with a consent form and going over it with them. Some of the things the consent form included: the interviews ranged from 15-30 minutes, they could skip any question or stop the interview at any time, their real name will be replaced with a pseudonym if included in the writing of the thesis,

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[2] Appendix (pg. 61) has the questions I used for my interviews

the interview will be recorded with their consent, and everything is strictly confidential and I am the only one with access for the interviews. I explained these things before recording the interview, so the participants would not feel surprised while being recorded. Then, I waited for the interviewees to ask me any questions and review the form one last time before they signed it. After they signed the consent form, whether electronically or in person, I read them the introduction to the interview and provided an overview of my thesis. Finally, I asked once more if they were ok with the interview being recorded and if they had any questions for me before we got started with the interview. My final question for my interviewees was also if they had any questions or statements for me or the interview in general; this question spawned even more conversation about the topic of friendship in schools, and it felt refreshing to have my respondents ask a question after answering many questions and doing most of the talking for the interview. Reiterating the interview process and opening the floor for my interviewees to ask questions helped my goal to make them feel comfortable and have a more conversation-based interview.

*Data Analysis*

The analysis for the interviews began with relistening the recordings and making sure the transcripts were accurate from Otter.ai. Relistening and rereading the interviews made me become even more familiar with the contents of each interview and began to learn the trends of similarities and differences between them. After I reviewed the contents of my interviews, I began to write analytic memos for each one. Analytical memos are similar to blogs as they are an outlet to gather your thoughts about the participants by thinking and writing even more about them (Saldaña 2021). These memos were about a page long and gave general ideas about the contents of the interviews and the different talking points that arose relating to each question.

Writing these memos continued to provide a narrative for each interview individually, but also the themes for the entirety of my thesis. These memos began the foundation for different focal points for the analytical chapters of the thesis.

Along with memos, coding was an integral part of the data analysis process. Each of the interview transcripts were entered in the code programming app: Dedoose. This app had a ton of coding options, but the first course of action was to create codes and subset codes based off the trends I observed while rereading the transcript or the analytic memos, and revisiting my literature review. A code qualitatively is most often a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, essence capturing or, evocative attribute for a portion of language-based data (Saldaña, 2021, p.5). A code for my thesis could be as simple as "friendship" but would have subsets of relevance like "support system", "motivation", or "spending time together". These codes were useful in splitting up interview sections into different overarching themes during 2nd and 3rd level coding. Going through each interview with the mindset of coding made the patterning across the interviews clearer; this mindset also produced even more insight into patterns that I had not thought of prior to this method of analysis. Dedoose had each code associated with different colors, the coloring of codes made going back into each transcript easier and helped determine the different talking points throughout an interview. Coding was essential to analyzing the interviews and connecting them to the topic of my thesis.

After the coding was complete for all the interviews, I went back to the analytical memos and added to them. Because there were new points of interest and acknowledgement of patterns and themes through the codes, writing more in the analytical memos was crucial for me to figure out the topics for the analytical chapters for this thesis. By writing more in the analytical memos, each interview evolved into its own story while relating to common themes among the other

interviews. For one interview in particular, it revealed how an interviewee's experience was an outlier in certain aspects that I would not have realized if I did not code and go back to the analytical memos. Once I went through every interview, the road to picking the focus of my thesis's analytical chapter became apparent. There were many topics of interest that showed up among these interviews, but only a couple truly related to the topic of my thesis and conveyed the appropriate amount of uniqueness from the interviewees.

Deciding the analytical chapters made finding the excerpts from the interviews applicable to each topic very easy as Dedoose lets its users look at every excerpt that was connected to a code. If the code was "academic focus", I could see every excerpt that I placed under this code across all interviews. These excerpts are a large part of the analytical process of my thesis and giving my interviewees a voice throughout. Having the analytical memos, codes, and audios of the interviews all at my disposal while writing the chapters for my thesis made the process so much smoother. Weaving in between my analysis and the primary sources while writing my thesis was significantly less stressful because of the intent I put into analyzing the data prior to writing about in the actual thesis. The data was easily accessible in multiple mediums and kept my vision for the chapters on track.

*Limitations*

The biggest constraint of conducting interviews for my methodology is time. With only 7 interviews for data collection due to the time-consuming data analysis period, there are not nearly enough participants to substantially back any conclusions for larger populations based on my findings. I did my best to interview participants from different walks of life and academic experiences, but my work would vastly benefit from a more widespread participant field to attain additional experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the lack of time prevented me from trying

to get IRB approval to go into local high schools and interview students and faculty over the course of a semester. These weaknesses aside, the genuine value of qualitative research is not its volume but how it can represent people's stories in detail. This research sets up a foundation of findings that I can go back to in the future with more time and resources. I acknowledge the limitations of my research, but I still believe my research was intentional, ethical, and filled with love; it also adds pivotal findings to the impacts friendship can have on academic performance and the importance of friendship for students overall.

# Chapter 4

INSPIRATION

I would not be where I was today if not for my friends motivating and inspiring me to continue to reach my goals and stay focused. There is no doubt that during a student's high school years, many inspirations and motivations come from a student's friendships. Most of the previous studies on friendship and academics always focus on the end result of their studies, and not the factors of friendship that affect students. Throughout my interviews, regardless of a participant's academic focus during high school, friends were an outlet of inspiration, support, and motivation. When thinking about friendship in high school, all interviewees were appreciative of their friends and the time they spent with them. School was an outlet for these relationships to build and prosper, and these interviews revealed how friends impact a student's academic involvement more than just grades. This chapter explores the inspiration and motivation students have on each other, inside the classroom and beyond it.

*Inspiration Before Entering School Doors*

A sentiment between the interviews that immediately became a trend was how friends motivated interviewees to show up to school. It did not matter if academics were at the forefront of someone's focus, friends were cited as a significant motivator to show up to school in the first place. School attendance is the foundation of academic engagement and friendship can play a key role in establishing that foundation. Below are excerpts of people reflecting on their motivation to go to show up for school:

When asked about their relationship with school, some of my participants responded as follows:

"you know, like, honestly, a part of me hated it, but I definitely, like, had a love for it too, because, like, sports and my friends were, like, definitely the main thing. But I mean, it was just, like, schoolwork and stuff and like homework. I just hated all that stuff. It was just a bother. Like, I felt like I could learn better at school, getting taught by a teacher than like me doing work by myself, you know? … I definitely, would like, go to school, get wake up school, like, thinking like, Oh man, I can't wait to see like, my boy, like, talk to him about this." (Reed[3], graduated high school six years ago and works as a package handler)

"I liked school, mostly a lot of friends have people to hang out with ... I would go to school, like at 7am because I have, like, zero period, yeah. And then I wouldn't leave until like 7pm because even after, even after, like, sports and stuff like, I would stay in this, like after school program that would like to basically just to hang out and also do homework, but also I loved the people there too." (Jared, graduated high school four years ago and is a current college student)

"I got to go see some people, like, I enjoyed being around, you know. So also, while I was in the school, wasn't just like everyone in school and then straight learning, you know, I got to go talk with friends, have a good time" (Victor, graduated high school four years ago and works in the maintenance industry)

As the excerpts above indicate, my interviewees revealed a perspective that signaled that the friends were motivators to go to school in the first place. There are influences that friends have on each other in the classroom, but students have to be in school for such influence. School

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[3] All proper names throughout this thesis are pseudonyms

was not just a place for learning for these interviewees, but a place of comfort and fun with their friends. People would wake up with their number one priority of being able to see their friends, they acknowledged how school was a place for learning but also how important it was for them to spend time with their friends. The importance placed on an individual's friends connects directly to the motivation in the classroom. In the middle excerpt, Jared references how he stayed at school for about twelve hours consistently and friends got him through these long days. Jared made it clear how much easier it was to stay at his school for such long periods of times because of how much he enjoyed his friends' presence and support. Jared was spending more time with his friends at school than his family on some days during high school, it speaks volumes to the love he referenced that made such a rigorous schedule worth it. Friends can break up the repetitiveness that high school can have and are constant resources for support; Reed and Victor, mentioned below, speak to this effect.

While interviewees spoke about their friends and the motivations they could provide for each other, they referenced how their friends took some of the social and academic pressures from high school off of each other. High school is a transformative time for students and for many it has lasting impacts on their lives socially and academically. Friendships allow for excitement and enjoyment in the classroom and out of it. Through this relief, academics become less of a burden with the support of friends and the ability to enjoy school. In the quote above, Reed directly referenced his excitement to go to school to see his friend even if he did not necessarily enjoy all the schoolwork he had during the day. It is unrealistic for a student to enjoy every second they spend in the classroom, but friends are an avenue to offload their struggles on one another on a day-to-day basis. Reed may not have been a fan of his schoolwork but being with his friends made high school a place he wanted to be and looked forward to going. Victor

also spoke about how he appreciated being able to talk with friends and "have a good time." The simple act of being around a friend can change how a student feels about school and the emotions they associate with it. It is powerful for a student to think about school with excitement or joy and friends are an unlimited source for such feelings. Something as miniscule as being able to talk with a friend can be the reason a student wants to show up to school at all.  The inspiration and motivation friends can have on one another in the classroom begins before students even enter their high school and it continues throughout the school day.

*Inspiration in the Classroom*

The motivation interviewees had to show up to high school, only increased as they got into the classroom. The effects that friends had on each other were profoundly influential on how the interviewees approached their work and time in the classroom. The trend of inspiration continued as interviewees reflected back on their school experience. Mentioned in my literature review (Cummings 2019, Flashman 2011, Wang and Degol 2015, Laninga-Wijnen et al. 2019), surveys on peer acceptance have been used as a measurement to determine how friends affect each other beyond just their grades and the positive effects they have on a student's social skills and emotional support. My study adds to this literature by providing, via my interview data, the nuanced factors of friendship that produced motivation, inspiration, and a support system. Throughout Natasha's interview, she constantly referenced how the humor between her friend group was monumental to her not only having a good time but performing well academically:

> "I like, specifically, like, reached out for that aspect, for motivation, you know, because, because you want to be, like, motivated by your friends and stuff with Wanda, it was the same, but it was mostly like, it was more like, light hearted, like, oh, like, we should work on this. And we'd laugh about it, like, like, finish your work. But yeah, I would say both

of them motivated me pretty well." (Natasha, graduated high school 2 years ago and is a current college student)

She directly referenced the laughter she shared with her best friend Wanda multiple times throughout the interview and how it created a dynamic that allowed for constant workflow and enjoyment. Similarly, another interviewee (Sabina) had a friend group that were open with each other and she spoke about how there was never pressure among the group, no matter how their interests and focus varied in school, they always were a consistent support system for each other:

> "we all motivated each other, for sure, and like, the other thing about our friend group is we were probably the friend group that was the most open about our emotions … there was a group of people that started in eighth grade who, instead of taking pre algebra, took algebra, and I was in that group, and the rest of my friends took pre algebra that year. So then, all through high school, I was like, a step ahead in terms of my math and science classes. So whenever my friends would take those classes, I would help them out with their homework if they had any questions." (Sabina, graduated high school 7 years ago and currently works an administrative job)

This support system spawned from activities like being on the speech team with friends, going on car rides together, or having rich conversations. Along with this emotional support came the academic support mentioned in the excerpt above. The trust built among this friend group directly correlated to some of the motivation and inspiration in the classroom, and the ability to help each other with their classwork.

In these excerpts, interviewees acknowledged how their friends motivated them; whether it was lighthearted like Natasha and her friends or Sabina helping her friends out; friendships

helped them elevate their academic focus. When surrounded by others that wanted to succeed in the classroom, it made it easier for interviewees to aspire to do well also. This collective inspiration for academics was an interesting development throughout the interviews as in Jared's interview[4], he also referenced his friends being motivators for him to excel in the classroom and stuck with them because they all had the same goal to go to college. Collective inspiration was a continual trend throughout the interviews because of how greatly friends affected one another. It did not seem to be something directly acknowledged between the friend groups, but it was apparent that their friends' aspirations and actions inspired interviewees to do the same. The goals of friend groups lined up especially when it was in regards to academic performance. In addition to this inspiration, the level of comfort that these groups of friends created amongst each other permitted their expressed vulnerability to hold each other accountable academically. Being able to laugh together and open up emotionally eased up their academic pressures. Knowing that you could goof around with each other and listen to each other's problems left room for motivation in the classroom and future goals.

The interviews in this thesis provided the rich descriptions of friendships that were necessary to explain why this study provides an important and fresh point of view. In most interviews conducted for this thesis, there were direct references to the specifics of friendships that spawned inspiration, motivation, and a support system. The quotes above are exemplars of this. Characteristics like trust, kindness, emotional support, and enjoyment in the classroom were all talked about in depth and with memories of moments that defined the different friendships and groups of friends. Seeing the reactions of interviewees lighting up when reflecting on how their friends positively affected them in high school and all the fond memories they shared was

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[4] The direct quote is on pg. 44

an indicator of how efficacious friendship can be on a student. The small moments like laughing in class before a presentation, staying late after school doing homework or in an academic club, and doing class activities with their friends in class are just some of the many examples of why friendship has the potential to be so special in school settings and how performing well academically can be significantly determined by the friends you make in class. The nuanced moments that friends share at school continuously build on a relationship that creates the support system necessary to have students excel in school.

*Limited Motivation and Inspiration*

Some high school environments mold friendships with an underlying culture of succeeding academically, others provide an educational environment in which academic performance is not at the forefront of the high school or its student population's mindset. Many public high schools do not have the resources nor the funding necessary to properly provide for all their students to achieve success academically. The financing systems of public schools have large wealth disparities due to property taxes being a primary source to fund schools which leads to higher-income areas ending up with well-funded schools and lower-income areas having poorly funded schools (American University 2020). The culture of a school plays such a significant role for students' aspirations academically, and the funding of each school district sets the standard in which a high school is promoting an inspiring learning environment or not. In some of the interviews conducted, there were interviewees who experienced significantly less academic motivation and inspiration. Whether it was the funding, culture setting, or both; some interviewees did not have the same high levels of motivation and inspiration as others.

The culture that friends and teachers set for interviewees in high school thoroughly determined where their academic focus ended up. During one of the interviews conducted for

this thesis, I asked: Did academics play a role in popularity? Bruce (out of high school 10 years ago and works in the restaurant business) responded with: "And the sad thing about it was that it was totally the opposite, the ones that, the ones that weren't so much in the school, were the popular ones, right?" The tone was set at Bruce's high school as the people that surrounded him did not value academics, but instead other aspects of life like "being cool" and sports. Later in the interview, Bruce gave more details about how his school gave priority to those who were good athletes or seen as cool by their peers:

> "Being popular came just me, my personality, … I loved being a class clown. I like making money. I like, you know, hanging out my friends, you know, obviously I thought those things to me were regular,  … No lie, got a story where my social studies teacher damn near did my whole test for me so I can pass. Wow, yeah. So definitely, we were definitely valued, every athlete in school"

 Again, it is apparent why Bruce's focus was not on the track of academics. There was no one around him whose inspiration or motivation originated from an academic outlook, and it was orchestrated by his school. He references how his actions were normalized by the people around him and how a teacher of his did everything in their power to make sure he would have a sufficient enough grade to play the sports he excelled at; this action by his teacher had no relation to genuine care about his academic progress. There was a minimal chance of Bruce shining in the classroom because nobody at his high school, including the school administration, placed value in it.

The lack of motivation and inspiration in Bruce's high school was apparent when he was asked about whether or not his friends motivated him: "Nah, I think I was. I think I was my own motivator and my parents, yeah you know I mean, definitely when you don't even know if they

really was your friend" Contrastingly to the other interviewees referenced above, Bruce did not

feel motivated or inspired in school or in other facets of life by his friends. Bruce may have been

popular in school, good at sports, and had a group of friends, but throughout his interview he

consistently mentioned how hard it was to truly trust someone as he felt that people can hide

their true colors, so they had to earn his trust. It is no coincidence that he struggled to find trust in

his friends at school when the culture of his high school seemed to place its focus on

insubstantial values like popularity and excelling in sports. Bruce acknowledged how the people

that were around him shaped him into who he became and that he was a better person because of

them but never felt truly connected to his peers.

There were other interviewees, similar to Bruce, whose surroundings did not promote

strong academic focus but were still motivated by their peers. Victor was motivated by his

friends, but he spoke about wanting to leave his mark in sports more than anything else; Reed

said his friends significantly motivated and inspired him, but felt strongly about how his school

viewed its students:

> "They know what they're doing. They're gonna have a few like, you know, outstanding
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> athletes that they're gonna focus on throughout the year. They're gonna have some
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> academically talented kids who are gonna, you know, they're gonna focus on and put on a
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> pedestal … I was just one of those, another, another number in the system. I think, I think
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> most high school students are that."

Victor and Reed had strong support systems among their friends, but it did not translate to their

academic prowess because it was not a priority among their friends and/or high school. Reed's

viewpoint on how his school placed students into specific categories conveys how limited

inspiration and motivation in high school affects a student's academic focus. Since Reed did not

feel like he was important to his school and neither did his friends, succeeding in academics were not a significant part of their high school experience. Reed was asked later in the interview if he felt more valued in school because of his friends:

> "100% … like, it definitely made it more like it definitely for me, like, especially being younger, and just not knowing how much education, like, how much value is in education, like, I just wasn't even thinking about that, really. I was just thinking about, like, damn. Like, the value in school is, like, I get to see my friends every day and, like, get do stuff after, you know, do sports also, which is, like, it was mainly just friends and sports, honestly, like, for sure, friends though, was, like, probably slightly above sports"

Reed reflected on the fact that he did not know how much value was in education during his high school years, instead his prime concerns were his friends and sports. There is no question that Reed's interests could have been more academically focused if his high school put him in a position in which he felt like he could prosper academically, but he, along with his friends, felt the opposite throughout his high school experience. Reed's feelings on his high school experience are the struggles that millions of kids across the country face when going to high school. If a school does not make groups of students feel valued, friend groups like Reed's will perpetuate the feeling of not trying academically because they feel like their work will not put them in a place of academic success anyways.[5]

To close this chapter, friends are just as significant to someone lacking academic focus as they are producing academic focus because the phenomena of collective inspiration for academics can easily shift to another aspect of life if there is not a constant method of fostering

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[5] Very relatable to McLeod's work and findings in *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* mentioned in the literature review

academic inspiration in the first place. Sabina, Natasha, and Jared all had friend groups that motivated them to continue to succeed in the classroom, while Reed, Bruce, and Victor all had friend groups that supported one another to a degree but did not feel the same academic motivations. A lot of the differences that these two groups of interviewees experienced has to do with the framework of the school environments that they attended. The question as to why some schools can create such a successful academic environment with strong friend circles has much to do with the school programs and their structural factors which will be addressed in the next chapter.

**Chapter 5**

*STRUCTURAL FACTORS CREATING FRIENDSHIP*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the structure of schools hold strong implications for the friendships made during a high school student's four-year experience. The budget of a school and its district affect the total resources and opportunities given to students[6], but this chapter will focus on high school programs specifically. Many students that go into high school are already placed in an advanced program are those that were tracked beforehand (Oakes, 2005). For example, Natasha described the process of getting into her school's advancement program: "all the intermediate schools or junior high schools would, like, send out applications for like the program, and you would get picked like, you would get know If you got picked before your freshman year, and basically start from your freshman year up until your senior year." For some high schools, there is only one chance to get into the most academically focused programs and the isolation of these advanced programs is a major contributor to some of the limited friendship opportunities in high school. Multiple interviewees cited their school programs as being significant contributors to the friend groups formed during their high school experience and this chapter follows the positive impacts they experienced because of these programs. This chapter also addresses the interviewees who did not have access to these programs and how that influenced the friendships they made and their isolated feelings towards their high school.

*Advanced Programs*

Following Natasha's journey through her academic program, she spoke about the social environment that the program created in order for her to make friends:

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[6] As mentioned in the article about school funding inequalities by American University on pg. 8 and 37

"we were kind of like our own, like, high school within High School, like, we would have

separate teachers and everything, oh yeah. And we had like, our own headmaster apart

from the principal. So because of that like I didn't get like the true, like, high school

experience, because it was kind of separated from everybody else, and like those, like

teachers would have, like more experience, or like, you know, just have better, like

backgrounds".

Natasha immediately references how she felt like her program was separate from the rest of her

high school peers and how it was limiting from a true high school experience. It was a notable

separation as well since Natasha explained later that her high school had close to 5,000 students

yet she was surrounded by the same 100 students. Natasha's friend pool was very limited due to

her program as soon as she walked through her high school doors, but she was surrounded by

peers who were also picked for the program based off the applications they submitted in middle

school. By having such a small and elite grouping of students, it cultivated an environment of

academic success which became a fundamental aspect of the friendships made.[7]

When asked about the friend who stood out to her most, Natasha referenced Wanda for

their shared humor but also spoke about Wanda's dedication to education and how it motivated

her to excel in the classroom also. Towards the end of the interview, Natasha acknowledged an

inner, positive shift in her academic focus throughout her high school years, however she

reiterated that the shift would not have continued if not for her friends. Natasha tested into her

advanced program and her academic prowess progressed even more through such a strong

program. She references her teachers who had better experience and/or backgrounds and

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[7] In agreeance with both studies (Bryan and Glynn 2011, Wang and Degol 2016) from the Expectation Setting portion of the Literature Review chapter

combined with her surrounding peers, her high school gave her all the factors necessary to shine academically. Just like her friends, her teachers were focused on making and encouraging Natasha to become the best student she could be. The opportunity Natasha had to develop her academic skills were what we would want for all our students, but she did have thousands of classmates who never had access to the opportunities she did; a discrepancy among schools and its programs, that has existed for decades.

Following the trend of being in advanced programs, Jared had a similar sentiment about his advanced programs and how the program shaped his friendships:

> "this advanced program, and what it would do, it was, like, place you in the, like, the most advanced classes that the school has to offer, and you usually with like, the same amount of the same exact people that you have, like, in other classes. So, like, so, I guess that's why we were also pretty close group. Like, there was just, like, so many of us that would hang out, yeah? We saw each other. Like, literally every, I was gonna say, every day, like, five, six years, yeah, messed up, honestly. Because you had to be in the program. You don't have to be for, like those classes, necessarily, but they put you on track for that. And so most of those classes are just, they call them, like the ante kids classes, and like no one else were taking them. So we had like, a monopoly about the advanced classes, like nobody else could get"

Instantly, Jared addressed that he consistently had the same group of people in his classes for five plus years and how it felt like his peers and himself had a monopoly on the advanced classes available at his high school as no one else could get into them. Similar to Natasha, Jared was surrounded around the same classmates for all of his high school experience. His peers were those that were considered the cream of the crop academically and stuck together throughout

high school. Jared and his friends got so close not only because they saw each other every day, but because they had such limited interactions with everyone else at their school. Students in advanced programs are isolated, not only academically but socially as well. Advanced programs influence students to holistically increase their academic focus as the classes they take are more challenging, but they have like-minded peers that back them up. Jared and Natasha both enjoyed their friends' company and aligned their goals and motivations with them as well, which seems to be the innate purpose of advanced programs in the first place.

Students like Natasha and Jared had every right to advance their educational prowess in high school but the problem arises when so many schools have advanced programs that limit the number of students that can take their academic pursuit to the next level. During their interviews, they both mentioned how their advanced programs alienated them from the rest of their classmates. They noticed the benefits that they received through these programs that their peers had no way of accessing. High schools continuously format different levels of classes and programs that puts specific groups of students on a higher pedestal than the rest and keeps advanced classes out of reach for students who did not get into these programs in the first place. Jared and Natasha both earned their spots in their high school's advanced programs and mentioned how their peers did not have access to them after the initial selection. This system lets the top students increase their academic skills while the rest are given less importance and recognition from their high schools talk (Oakes 2005). The friendships made depending on where a student is placed dictates their mindset towards their actions in the classroom, but there is no denying that the system of these high schools majorly impact the mindsets that students develop in school and influence each other with. Natasha and Jared had such a positive experience in these programs, but how different would their high school experiences had been if

they were not deemed good enough for their advanced programs and instead were placed in the grouping of students that were viewed as average. Their friends would have had completely different ideals and focuses, their teachers would have viewed them with less potential than those in the program above them, and most importantly, their confidence in the classroom may have waivered significantly.

*College Expectations*

A structural aspect of high school that goes hand in hand with the advanced programs of students is also the expectation setting and resources available to encourage students to go to college. Sabina went to a high school with a very small population of students, somewhere in the 300-400 student range, and took advanced classes, but was much less isolated than a student like Natasha in her advanced classes, because her school was so small. Sabina gave a rough estimate on how many students in her class went to college*:* "most people in my class, I want to say, like, at least two thirds of my graduating class did go to college after graduation, and 1/3 of those people went specifically to the same state university." Sabina's high school was a pipeline to college for its students as most of them went to college directly after graduating. Her high school was small, so the influence of friends, teachers, and their expectations held even more weight because of the school's population. It was an expectation for students to care about their grades enough to get into their local state college or aim even higher. A lot of students do not have an absolute sense of direction when they enter high school. Being at a high school that promotes going to college throughout a student's four years with classmates who share the same goal can shift a student's thinking about college and their academic futures.

As cited above, Jared was in advanced programs that promoted being focused on academic performance. But he also spoke about his friends and their desires to go to college:

"like all my friends, like they had no doubts about wanting to go to college and like, until I like, and that was my, my track, too. Yeah, I surrounded myself with people that want to go to college. I want to be like, I wanted to go to college. Yeah. So they definitely motivated me in that way."

Jared purposefully continued to surround himself by those who wanted to go to college because he knew that by surrounding himself with classmates who want to go to college, his focus and intent would strengthen partially due to his peers. Jared's participation in his high school's advanced programs provided him with a friend group who had college aspirations similar to his own. High schools like Jared, Natasha, and Sabina's have built in expectations and promoting confidence in the classroom, while producing students who enjoy their academic experience and want to perform well academically. Then, these students in these programs have friends who also want to succeed and become a support system for one another that forms because of a common goal. Having a collective of students working towards the same goal creates an environment that is hard to disrupt because these students know, not only that they all want the same positive academic experiences out of high school; but that they all have each other's backs through struggles and triumph.

*Varying Expectation Setting*

Reed's sentiment about himself being just another number in the system and feeling like most high school students are[8], is a perfect example of how the culture of a high school impacts a student's feelings and expectations during their four years at school. Reed continued on about his thoughts on his high school's direction in terms of its students:

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[8] Direct Quote from pg. 39

"Like, that's, that's how high schools work. They want to look good for other high schools and for themselves, you know, it makes other people other, you know, parents, or people who are future going to be parents, like, want to bring their kids to that school maybe when older, you know."

Reed's issues with his high school experience went beyond just his thoughts and feelings, but the systematic problems many high schools have as well. Reed did not feel valued by his school nor did he feel that they cared about how well he was going to do in the classroom. Instead, he figured that his high school was trying to look good for future parents and other school districts, and students like himself got thrown to the side because of this goal. Individuals like Reed quickly realize the hierarchy of their high school and their place in it. The system high schools put in place alienates groups of students and friends as their focus and resources go towards the students who "excel" academically and in some cases, sports. Reed felt like his future and academic development was not cared for nor had any confidence to grow either due to feeling like a second thought to his high school's overall priority and goals. Combining the unbalanced systematic school structures with the friend groups that form throughout high school that heavily influence one another, it is no surprise many groups of students feel hopelessness throughout their high school years.

Bianca's (graduated high school four years ago, current college student) interview was very in the middle when it came to her expectation setting compared to other interviewees in this thesis. Her mindset towards school was very relaxed but her academic performance throughout high school was positive. Bianca did not necessarily feel the urge to put all of her effort in academics, she had an standard that she wanted to uphold and did so: "I never saw High School as, like, oh, like, I need to try so hard because, like, as long as my grades are above, like a B, I'm

fine*."* Bianca also applied her low-stress mindset of school to studying also: "you know, at least I wasn't a person who would study for anything, like, it was just like, God's will, like, whatever even happens that day." Bianca's expectations were not low nor high, she knew how good she had to be in order to succeed academically and consistently stayed above this self-made threshold. Interestingly, when asked if she felt valued by her high school, Bianca did not feel in any way different than any of her peers. Her experience is intriguing because even though it seems as if she should have faced some amount of academic struggle throughout her four years of high school but did not for one reason: her peers and friends.

In her interview, Bianca consistently referenced how her friends during her high school years were primarily those that were in her classes. She had friends outside of her classes as well, but she spent time with those in her classes the most. Bianca spoke about the academic support she received from her friends:

> "I knew that if I had something to do for school, like, I wasn't, like, gonna be like, oh, like, I don't care about it. Like, I'm gonna stay home and do it. Like I would, I'd be like, you know, like, we can't hang out, but I have to be home at this time because I have to do this for school. And like, they'd be like, Oh yeah, okay, we have to do that too. So I'm gonna go home. And then, like, it was like, it wasn't like we were, like, supporting each other to do homework, but like, it was just like, oh, like, it was definitely helpful to know people to help you. You know, like, if my my friend knew somebody, like, I've been Oh, like, do you have this? No, but I know this person has this. So like, let me get you help. Always. Like, at least, like, sometimes I would correlate some friendships as, like, a little bit transactional, like to, like, get the help for whatever this academic school needed ,or like, whatever the homework was"

She immediately shut down the idea of her friends directly supporting each other through homework but instead referred to her friends as a backbone to her academic work. If she was finding difficulty with an assignment, she knew she had a friend to help her get the assignment or answers necessary to complete it. Bianca took her work seriously but also did her work individually. When her friends tended to be involved in her work, it pertained to the answers of her assignments more so than working together on assignments. Her approach to academics in high school was unique from all the other interviewees because she made some friends with the purpose of gaining academic help and made genuine connections with some peers in her classes that helped her stay focused and enjoy high school:

> "But then, like, even when we were doing like, like, in classroom activities like that, was always like, it felt better to have those people that I, like, kind of knew more … Even, like, those kids, like, to me, they were smart, so, like, it was always like, oh, like, they know what they're talking about. And they're good people like to talk to. So it was just like, you, yeah, like, again, like, it feels like, it feels like, I think about it like, a little bit transactionally, but like, they did help me, like, like in school to stay focused somewhat."

Bianca's friends played a significant role in how she felt about class and her success in the classroom. But the transactional relationship she had with some friends revealed what her top priorities in high school were, even though she spoke about a pretty lackadaisical approach to high school. Her friends helped shape her priorities in the classroom as they provided her with the help necessary to stay successful throughout her high school career. Bianca did not put everything into succeeding academically, but she continuously made sure that she held herself to the standard that she personally imposed. She acknowledged the transactional relationship she felt that she had with some friends, but these friends that helped her by giving answers to a

worksheet or homework assignment were also referenced as the people that helped her stay focused.

Bianca's experience in high school was very telling for expectation setting as she had personal expectations for herself but had friends in her classes helped her reach them. She, like Reed, did not feel valued from her high school but both acknowledged how their friends made going to school worth it. The main difference between the two was their mindsets going into high school, Bianca came into high school knowing high school for setting up the foundation for her future and had academic aspirations for herself. Contrastingly, Reed mentioned how he did not learn about the value in education during his four years[9]. Reed, unlike Bianca, was not surrounded by other students with academic aspirations and had a sense of hopelessness that his friends and high school did not help stifle. Bianca did not feel the support from her school to inspire her to prosper in the classroom, but she did have friends in class that supported her academic goals and came into high school with the knowledge of how impactful a student's education in high school can be. Bianca and Reed's stories are not that different from one another, but Bianca's surroundings were helpful regarding her academic lifestyle. Her case is so telling because the factors that played into her success were self-oriented but could have easily gone another direction if her friends in the classroom were not helpful or she did not have goals for herself to reach.

Interviewees in advanced programs went into their high school with the expectations set from their schools to be a level above the rest of their peers academically, and interviewees that were not in these programs did not have productive expectations that were created from their

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[9] Direct Quote on pg. 40

surroundings or the prior knowledge of the importance of educatio going into high school. Bianca's experience of navigating her school and figuring out a positive method of academic achievement is not a common trend among high school students. It was inspiring to hear about her high school experience, but most students have stories similar to Bruce and Reed as they dealt with the harsh reality of favoritism that most public high schools across the country employ. Seventy-seven percent of public high schools believe they do an excellent/very good job preparing their students for college with seventy-three percent of public high schools offering some type of advanced programs or classes (NCES 2024). These high schools want to promote themselves as preparing their students for college and these advanced programs and courses are associated with doing so. The students who are not in these classes or programs, who eventually feel that there is no way to access higher level programs or classes, get stuck where they are at academically and lose all motivation to try and grow academically because they are not the "special" ones. On top of high schools playing favorites in many instances, some high schools also focus on aspects outside of the classroom like sports and student-athletes like Bruce were encouraged to do well in sports more than anything else. There is this notion that high schools give their students everything necessary to thrive in the classroom, but what is not considered is how much students realize their value in their schools. Students who are in advanced programs and classes know what their expectations are, but so do their peers who are not a part of those programs and classes; high schools can put a student's potential in a box solely on the way they frame different levels of classes. These boxes that high schools put students in, create friend groups whose expectations align because they all know how their school views them, whether good or bad.

**Chapter 6**

*CONCLUSION*

Every interview conducted for this research agreed on one sentiment, friends do play a role in how a student performs in the classroom. There were various levels of influence, but every interviewee addressed how their friends shaped their educational experiences. Some referenced the outright positive influence of friends on their grades, some spoke about the detrimental nature their friends had on academics, and some were a little bit in the middle. Based on my study, I can conclude that friends do affect the academic performance of students. Each interviewee spoke about the influence of their friends in different ways, and there was no outright trend or predictor to what made a friend impact an interviewee's academic journey. The influence of friendship had no bounds for interviewees as many cited their friends as being a primary reason for wanting to show up to school in the first place. Beyond their academic performance, friends motivated interviewees in larger ways than just the classroom as both the interviewees who excelled or had more educational struggles, both groups cited their friends as motivators to get out of the door in the morning. Regardless of the level of academic influence a friend group had on a particular interviewee, friends were referenced as being a support system for all. These support systems that most interviewees spoke about in their interviews are potent representations as to why some students prosper in the classroom more than others, even with a similar level of support, as the social and academic structure was the difference maker for many interviewees and the following paragraphs will discuss how.

Interviewees who were in advanced programs or classes had friends that promoted success, and their schools put high expectations on them throughout all four of their high school years. These students had support systems that inspired them to do well in the classroom as they

all had the structure necessary to back up their desires. Interviewees who were not in these programs had a completely different story as some of them had support systems just as strong as their advanced counterparts, but did not have the resources nor the inspiration to propel their academic aspirations. These interviewees did not feel valued by their high schools since they felt like their high school's priorities were someplace else. And the interviewees who did not feel directly valued by their high school shifted their focuses beyond the classroom to aspects of their life like sports or spending time with their friends. All the interviewees enjoyed spending time with their friends regardless of whether they felt valued by their high school or not, but the collective mindset of the varying groups differed significantly. Interviewees who were in advanced programs and felt valued by their schools, felt like they could succeed and had friends who felt the same way. Interviewees who were disvalued from their school tended to make friends who felt like them and stayed pretty stagnant in regards to their academic pursuit.

This discrepancy that some interviewees faced was completely systematic. Their high schools did not prioritize learning, and their academic lifestyles suffered because of it. In some cases, a high school's focus can completely determine if a student takes their academics seriously or if they feel that they can improve in the first place. Bruce's experience was the seamless example of this as his teachers wanted him to achieve athletically and his peers were focused more on the social dynamics of each other much more than someone's grades or classwork. Bruce's direction of focus was determined by his school and their goals which completely left out the ability to advance academically. Bruce's example was direct, but other interviewees were indirect as they felt like they should shift their focus on other aspects of life because their high school was not providing an avenue for them to grow educationally. Many public high schools disregard large populations of their student bodies academic progress because they pre-determine

which kids are "special" before they even enter the high school doors for the first time (Oakes 2005). Students like Reed and Victor were fighting such an uphill battle because their school did not value their academic pursuit, and they realized this during their years in high school. Their experiences bring up the question: How are students supposed to keep a growth mindset in high school when they feel as if their high school is not prioritizing their futures compared to their peers in advanced classes or programs? The interviews from this thesis have unveiled that high schools promoting an environment for their students to feel empowered to learn and succeed academically regardless of the level of class they are in, could be the solution. These interviewees who had different focuses and low academic expectations could have easily shifted if their high schools gave them the power to or even made them feel like that was the case. It is even more understandable how a student could not make advancements academically if their friends and peers feel the same disvalue that they do.

An important revelation from Reed, in which he referenced how he did not realize how valuable a high school education was[10], also determines a student's attitude towards the education of their high school years. When students go into high school with the knowledge of how important it is for their futures could be all the difference for how serious they take their schooling. The interviewees who were in advanced programs not only were in them in high school, but tended to have been in some sort of advanced enrollment in their pre-teen years that put them on the advanced track in high school. The luxuries of being in an advanced program goes beyond just the grades and friends you will have but also a student's mindset towards their future. Students know that staying in these programs are beneficial to their lives after high school and their potential to go to college. A student who is not in these programs and do not have

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[10]Direct quote from pg. 40

parents and friends around them who are engraving into the student's mind about how important their education is, do not have any means to learn about how lifechanging taking their education seriously can be. It is a cop out in U.S. society, to always blame a student for not trying hard enough in school to succeed. The reality is that there are so many students attending high school that never learned or believed how doing well in high school will help them compared to their advanced programmed counter parts who came into high school with said knowledge. A student in a friend group filled with those who never felt valued or cared for, will never associate school as a place holding the possibility to change their life.

The differences in friendships between the interviewees who were in advanced programs and would not be noticeable if you took away the context of the classrooms in which they spent time together. The high school system has to provide opportunities for all to flourish in the classroom, or scenarios in which groups of students give up on improving their academics will continue. My study provides evidence that high school students are significantly more clever than high schools give them credit for, and they know the difference of being wanted or just tolerated. The interviewees who were in advanced programs did not describe characteristics of their friends that differed from the interviewees' friends who were not in advanced programs, the only difference was their mindsets. Those in advanced programs constantly referenced the motivations that their friends provided them with to succeed in the classroom, and those who were not in advanced programs had friends that inspired them but not academically. The current high school system makes it almost impossible for a student not in advanced programs to feel wanted or motivated to succeed academically. Friendships do shape a student's trajectory in high school, but the structural factors are what put these friend groups in certain areas of academic performance in the first place.

*Future Studies*

A trend brought up by many interviewees that could be explored in a further study were the childhood friends who, a majority of interviewees referenced, they went to high school with. These childhood friend groups definitely played a role in molding the academic performance of interviewees. Many interviewees referenced how they had friends from before high school that they stayed close for all four years of high school. These relationships were not probed upon in tremendous detail, but it would have been interesting to see how these friendships before high school formed their academic expectations going into their high schools. The relationships formed before high school are an immense point of interest for potential future studies relating to this topic because they can play a role in putting a student into an academic box before starting high school. It is also interesting to consider how making new friends may shift the ways in which students approach their academics and to discover if childhood friends grow apart if they are separated based due to differing academic programs in high school.

Another important study would be to interview current high school students, I think this dynamic would have introduced a completely fresh and evolving angle that interviewing people after their high school experience could not provide. In the future, it would be beneficial to look at the relationship of friendship and academic performance in an actual classroom as an observer over time. Doing this case study through different levels of K-12 would explore how the influence of friends on academic performance would change and it would be telling to see how student's mindsets regarding their academics developed over the years. Doing case studies in classrooms would also contribute to a larger pool of participants than I was able to gather than for this study. Along with observing students while in school, interviewing teachers and

administrators would add to the perspective of friendships and academics as they would give outside observations that the students themselves did not have.

*Final Thoughts*

- **How does the circle of school friends, attending the same public high school, affect the academic performance of students?**

  o **What are the key factors of that friendship?**

Bringing it back to the research question of my thesis, my interviews revealed how the relationships formed in high school greatly impact how a student views school and performs academically. Productively or not, it was out of an individual or their friend groups' hand to completely determine the level of their aspirations and ability to academically succeed. Systematically, it felt unattainable for interviewees who were not in advanced programs to flourish academically in high school. But the second part of my research question is the focal point of my final thoughts. In conclusion, the most influential aspect of friendship that affects the academic performance of one another is belief. Belief was the common denominator of every interviewee's aspirations or lack thereof. Those that had the structural support from their high schools and had friends with the same level of support, believed that they had the resources and ability to succeed. Interviewees who felt like their high schools did not have a vested interest in themselves or their friends academically, never had a cultivated belief that other interviewees referenced, even if they had the desire to succeed in school

In the United States, the idea of the American Dream, if you work hard enough at anything you can eventually achieve it, has been around for over a century (Borelli 2024). Whether you believe this idea or not, the current public high school system does not promote an

equal environment for every student to achieve. If schools have limited advanced program spots and classes, students will be left out regardless of how capable or aspiring they are. The interviews conducted for this thesis conveyed this idea in depth through the testimonies of the interviewees. Every interviewee had friends that they valued dearly, but the same cannot be said for their high schools. If a student goes into high school with limited knowledge on what high school can do for them and what it means for their future, the moment they perceive that their school does not appreciate them to the same level as their advanced program peers; the chance of high academic performance drops drastically. It drops not only because the student realizes the academic hierarchy set in place, but also their friends do not believe that they are of worth to their high school academically either. At least with the concept of the American Dream, someone has their whole life to try to achieve the success they are longing for, but high school is only four, transformative years for many people's lives. The academic system in the United States perpetuates groups of students feeling undervalued compared to their peers and this system should change.

*Hope*

The findings of this thesis have made it apparent how impactful friendship is, as every interviewee stressed their appreciation of their high school friends and how they shaped and molded their experiences. It did not matter about the level of academic performance of the interviewee, they appreciated the experiences they had with friends and acknowledged their impacts. While the U.S. public high school system has not been set up for the equality of student opportunity, the biggest takeaway from this thesis is that the influence friends have on one another is instrumental and undeniable. Friendship has the potential to be a beacon that every single high school across the country can embrace if each student is given the same amount of

care and resources. The best part of every interview for me was hearing people tell their favorite memories from high school with their friends and the utter joy they had reflecting back on such a nostalgic time for them. These pure emotions friendship creates is not something that can be manufactured but is only formed from genuine connection. These immeasurable connections of friendships should not be brushed past but used as a tool to promote cohesion, enjoyment, and positive academic performance in the classroom. Having more resources and time for research like this would go a long way to gain more of a concrete grasp on just how much friends can play a role in a student's academic performance.

**Appendix (Questions for Thesis)**

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

2. What was your favorite aspect of the friendships you made in high school?

3. What was your relationship with high school?

   o How did your friends affect that relationship?

4. Were you popular in high school?

   • If yes, did academics play a role in your popularity?

5. How did race play a part in making friends and the landscape of your high school?

6. Did you feel valued by your high school?

   • If not, did your friends help you feel more valued?

7. Was there a specific friendship you had that stood out to you when reflecting on high school?

   • What characteristic of this friendship made it stand out?

8. Did your friends motivate you? (Does not need to be academics related)

   • And if they did, how did they?

9.. Did your academic focus change throughout high school?

   How much of a role did your friends play in that shift?


10. What was your favorite memory with your friends, both in and out of high school?


 11.  That was my last question, do you have any questions for me.


Thank the Interviewee!

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