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# Student Reflections on a 'Likeminds' Experience

Dr Margaret Plunkett

Margaret.plunkett@education.monash.edu.au

# Introduction

This study involves a group of Year 12 students reflecting on their educational experience at a rural secondary college (YSC), where for the first 3 years they were grouped in two different settings – ability based and mainstream.

As year 7s these students had participated in an initial study examining differences in perceptions relating to the academic and social aspects of their first year in a disadvantaged school which had introduced a 'like minds' class to motivate and engage high ability students.

This research represents part of a longitudinal follow up study aimed at determining whether the different settings impacted over time on student perceptions of their experience.

Initial findings in 2002 had suggested that the ability grouped students had more positive perceptions relating to their experience, both academically and socially and the present study supports a sustained positive impact.

# The initial research (2002)

- This research examined differences in perceptions of 50 Year 7 students in two different educational settings in a disadvantaged rural secondary school
- One group of 25 students were grouped on the basis of ability (homogeneous) while the other group of 25 were from the (heterogeneous) mainstream setting
- A major focus of the study was to determine if ability grouping had an impact on self-beliefs and motivation, as well as achievement.

# Ability grouping in Victoria

- At the secondary level, most homogeneous grouping occurs in either of two forms:
  - Select Entry Accelerated Learning Programs (SEALPs)
  - Alternate Advanced Learning Programs (AALPs)
- Began with 1 school (University High in 1981)
- In 1995 Victoria introduced a policy “*Bright Futures*” which resurrected the idea and now 34 secondary schools offer official SEALPs and many more offer AALPs (or unofficial SEAL programs)

# How do SEALPs work?

- Combines two tenets of gifted education – *ability grouping* and *acceleration*
- A group of approximately 25 Year 7 students are chosen through a range of selection criteria to form a class which remains together for academic subjects for the first 3-4 years (years 7-10)
- This group *may* be offered an accelerated progression through the first four years of the curriculum

- Students can complete their secondary schooling in 5 rather than 6 years or
- Complete a wider range of VCE subjects – enables areas of interest to be investigated and adds to university entrance (ENTER) score
- Complete some first year university subjects (costs involved)
- Undertake an overseas exchange or GAP year (costs involved)

# How do AALPs work?

- Generally they do not include an accelerative option
- Students are still specifically selected, usually through similar criteria as for SEALP selection
- Students complete the first 3 - 4 years together in a separate class – pace is faster and curriculum usually different but still remain at school for 6 years.

# Gippsland's experience

- Gippsland is a large region in Victoria, Australia. It has a number of disadvantage factors including:
  - low retention rates
  - poor VCE results
  - higher than average youth unemployment
- There are 3 official SEALPs for the region and virtually every other secondary school in the region offers Alternate Advanced Learning Programs (AALPs)
- This presentation outlines findings from the experience of one Gippsland secondary school, which began offering an AALP in 2002, aptly named the *Like Minds* (LM) program.

# The 'Like Minds' program

The LM program was introduced in 2002 in an attempt to meet the particular cognitive & social needs of fast learners.

It was intended to bring together a group of motivated, academically capable, but not necessarily gifted Year 7 students who could work through the basic curriculum more quickly and then be given the opportunity to pursue topics at a broader and deeper level.

It was not intended to be a “gifted children’s program” as such, for it was felt that the drawing area was too limited to provide 25 children who would fall into the “gifted” range in terms of IQ.

However students were expected to be capable of coping with a slightly differentiated curriculum and a faster pace.

# Aims of the 'LM' curriculum:

- To develop high level skills in all levels of study.
- To improve student motivation & self-esteem by working with a group of intellectual peers.
- To develop a non-repetitive curriculum that teaches the students what they don't know rather than going over what they do.
- To decrease student boredom and frustration.
- To provide greater student challenges.
- To develop higher level thought processes.

# Equity issues

There was an obvious concern by the school that the LM class not be perceived by the community as a *special* opportunity, but rather as an equalising factor, assisting able students to utilise their potential in an appropriate learning environment. The school was also concerned that the operation of the program not result in students (or in many cases their parents) or teachers feeling cheated because they were not part of the program.

It was important therefore in this evaluation to include students, teachers and parents who had not been involved in the LM class to gain a comparative view of how educational experiences were perceived.

# *The sample*

## **Students**

- 50 students (22% of Year 7 cohort ) participated, 25 from the Year 7 LM group, and 25 from other Year 7 groups.
- Slight gender bias in the overall sample with 22 (44%) males and 28 (56%) females. The LM sample was more even, with 12 (48%) females and 13 (52%) males.
- Ages ranged from 11 years 8 months (at Jan 1) to 13 years 1 month with very few differences between the LM and Mainstream samples.

# Sample continued

## Teachers

- 10 teachers participated in interviews and completed surveys, of which 6 taught in both LM & Mainstream Year 7 classes, and 4 taught in *only* Mainstream (3) or LM (1) classes.

## Parents

- 19 parents/guardians participated in phone interviews
- 10 who had a child in the LM class and 9 who had a child in the Mainstream cohort

# Year 7 Learning Culture Survey

A specially designed student survey was administered at the start and end of the school year examining students' perceptions relating to:

- 1. Attitudes to learning*
- 2. Motivational orientation*
- 3. Self-efficacy (confidence in their ability)*
- 4. Socialization (friendships, belonging etc)*
- 5. Achievement gains were also examined*

Plus students were interviewed twice during the year.

# Student Interviews

Some of the most enlightening differences in student perceptions came out in interviews where students discussed in detail both the academic and social contexts of their different class settings.

The following 4 tables illustrate the different issues raised by the two student groups during interviews.

**Table 1: Academic context themes emerging from interviews with the ABLE group (n=25)**

Themes			No. of times mentioned	
			Time 1	Time 2
Positives	Structural/ Curricula related	Pace of classes – not having to wait for others	11	9
		Less boredom due to less repetition	15	15
		More opportunities to be challenged and develop autonomy	6	7
	Climate (support academic freedom/ respect)	Freedom to express ability	11	10
		Achievement respected	13	8
		Lively thought provoking discussions possible	6	8
		Good work ethic	17	15
	Negatives	Teacher related	Expectations	16
More homework set			14	16
Less support offered (math)			7	12
Environment		Emphasis on grades	8	14
		Hard to excel – everyone smart	4	6
		Abilities differ between subjects	5	9

While like-mindedness enabled classes to be structured at a more suitable pace with less need for revision and repetition, it also created an environment in which expectations were high and competition for recognition was evident.

Interestingly, some of the students presented their ideas as both positives and negatives such as less support from teachers, especially in math, as a negative but the associated opportunity to develop autonomy as a positive.

**Table 2: Academic context themes emerging from interviews with the Mainstream group (n=25)**

<b>Themes</b>			<b>No. of times mentioned</b>	
			<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
<b>Positives</b>	<b>Environment</b>	Easy to maintain top position	3	3
		Relaxed/Not competitive	14	11
		Free time	12	9
	<b>Curricula</b>	Work is easy	15	12
		Teacher expectations not high	9	6
<b>Negatives</b>	<b>Environment</b>	Noisy, distracting	11	9
		Achievement not valued	8	7
	<b>Curricula</b>	Boring/repetition	6	9
		Diverse ability levels	6	2
		Comparisons not meaningful	5	5

The Mainstream group raised different issues relating to the academic contexts of their learning environment. Generally, students concentrated on the nature of work provided in their classes and the environment for both negative and positive aspects at both interviews.

In most instances, fewer references were made to academic aspects during the second interview, except in relation to classes being boring and repetitive, which was mentioned more frequently at Time 2.

# Social contexts

The discussion which ensued during interviews in relation to socialisation reinforced the numerical data but it also introduced important information on why the LM group viewed the social aspects of membership in their class so positively.

For the LM group, acceptance, friendship and freedom from teasing/harassment emerged as major positive themes, while teacher expectations and friendship restrictions were raised as negative consequences.

The Mainstream group emphasised friendships and enjoyment, with opportunities for socialisation with classmates as positives and surprisingly, acceptance was listed as a negative aspect associated with their class membership.

**Table 3: Social context themes emerging from interviews with the LM group (n=25)**

<b>Themes</b>			<b>No. of times mentioned</b>	
			<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
<b>Positives</b>	<b>Friendships</b>	Likeminded interests	15	18
		Like abilities	16	15
		New friendships	16	19
	<b>Acceptance</b>	Feeling comfortable	14	12
		Lack of teasing/ freedom from harassment	12	9
	<b>Environment</b>	Less pressure to 'muck around'	10	5
		Positive relationships with teachers	10	7
<b>Negatives</b>	<b>Friendships</b>	Friendships are school-based/ difficult to sustain outside school (distance)	14	4
		Few opportunities to mix with students outside LM (including former friends)	7	5
	<b>Environment</b>	Teachers less willing to tolerate misbehaviour due to LM status	9	12

**Table 4: Social context themes emerging from interviews with the Mainstream group (n=25)**

<b>Themes</b>			<b>No. of times mentioned</b>	
			<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
<b>Positives</b>	<b>Friendships</b>	Diversity – lots of different students	4	5
		Likeminded interests	6	6
		Like abilities	4	5
	<b>Environment</b>	Fun/ enjoyment	16	12
		Relaxed environment	8	6
		Opportunities for socialisation	10	9
<b>Negatives</b>	<b>Acceptance</b>	Isolation within group	4	5
		Reluctance to show ability for fear of rejection	4	5

# Student comments from the LM group

*“I've met new friends that are more on the same level in a way so you can all interact without having to worry about stuff they won't know. We may be a bit more intelligent but it doesn't mean we can handle more homework. I used to get teased for being smart in Grade 6 for helping one of my friends because other kids don't want to be smarter, they just want to be kind of like even” (male)*

*“I think the LM class was put together so all the smart people weren't singled out and teased, so they were all in a big group and wouldn't feel alone because they were smart” (female)*

*“I think we know we're all smart so it's not as much peer pressure as if you don't have to muck around cause you know we all want to be there to learn a little bit more than other classes” (female).*

# Comments from Mainstream group

*“I love my class because all of my friends are in it and we have fun. We do our work but it isn’t a very hardworking group so we get the attention because we are the only ones who finish” (female).*

*“I like the different types of kids in our class, some are naughty and don’t care about their work but they make it interesting. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a quiet class where people did their work but it wouldn’t be that exciting” (female).*



One high achieving female student's comment appeared to contain an innuendo that 'easy work' was the norm within her class:

*“ I like my class because I don't like being too smart — I like being normal, then I can just do easy work. I wouldn't like to be a child genius because I like being like everyone else who just has fun most of the year” (female).*



# Conclusions from 2002 study

Generally, both student groups discussed their classes in a positive manner but the comments illustrated the different emphasis placed on like-mindedness and helped to explain why the students in the LM group mentioned this aspect so frequently.

For some, the class represented a level of acceptance and/or friendship not previously experienced, which appeared to become more entrenched over time.

# The follow-up study (2007)

In 2007, the initial cohort began their final year of secondary schooling (Year 12), and it was felt to be a suitable time to instigate an evaluation of how the LM program had impacted on that entire year level.

Of the initial cohort of 25 LM students, 19 still remained at the school (16 completed surveys and interviews)

Of the initial 25 Mainstream cohort, 14 were still at the school but only 11 participated in surveys and 8 in interviews. However to provide some balance another 9 Mainstream students also completed surveys.

# Aims

## Surveys & interviews aimed:

- firstly to determine student perceptions of their overall secondary educational experience and
- secondly determine whether there was a difference between the perceptions of students who had been involved in the LM program compared with students who had not.
- thirdly to see if the results differed from or confirmed those of an earlier study (Plunkett, Harvey & Harvey, 2003)

# Survey Instrument

The *Year 12 Educational Experience Survey* had been specifically designed for a Year 12 group in another school (ZSC) in response to a number of issues that had been raised by teachers of these students (e.g. it had been noted that the LM students tended to be fairly demanding of teachers, seemed to have remained a fairly separate clique).

It was decided to use the same survey at YSC to provide comparative data.

# Survey categories

1. Self–efficacy any differences in beliefs about capabilities between the two groups?
2. Friendships – in particular did the LM friendships endure through to Year 12?
3. Teachers –any differences between the LM and other Year 12's in regard to their relationships with/or expectations of teachers?
4. Equity issues– did either group see any differences in the types of opportunities that were offered to them as members of YSC?
5. Expectations – how did the groups feel about expectations placed on them by teachers, parents, peers and themselves?
6. Work ethic or attitudes – were there any differences between attitudes toward work and study?

# Results: Background information – whole Year 12 cohort

- Forty students (32% of YEAR 12) completed the survey, 14 (35%) males and 26 (65%) females. Sixty-three percent of the sample worked part-time, and 48% still played sport on a regular basis.
- There was a fairly even gender mix with regard to part-time work but males were more involved in sport (57% of males compared to 42% of females).

# Between group differences

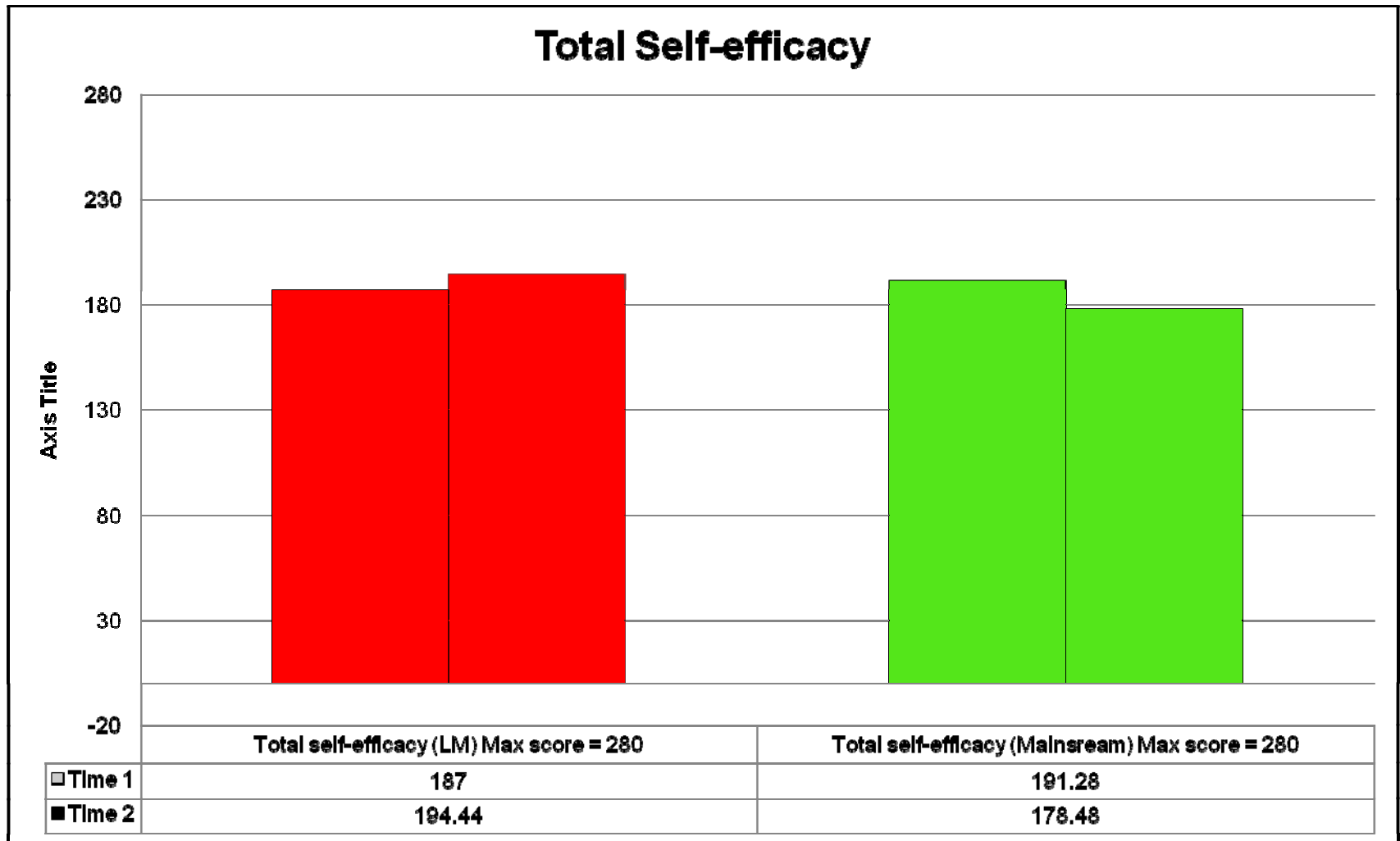
- It was interesting that the LM students were more likely to be involved in sport (50%) compared with the mainstream (46%) and also to be involved in part-time work (69% LM; 58% mainstream). However, while 50% of mainstream students worked 8 hours or more per week, only 38% of LM students did.
- This helps negate the stereotypical image of high ability students concentrating on academic studies at the expense of all other pursuits.

# Self-efficacy

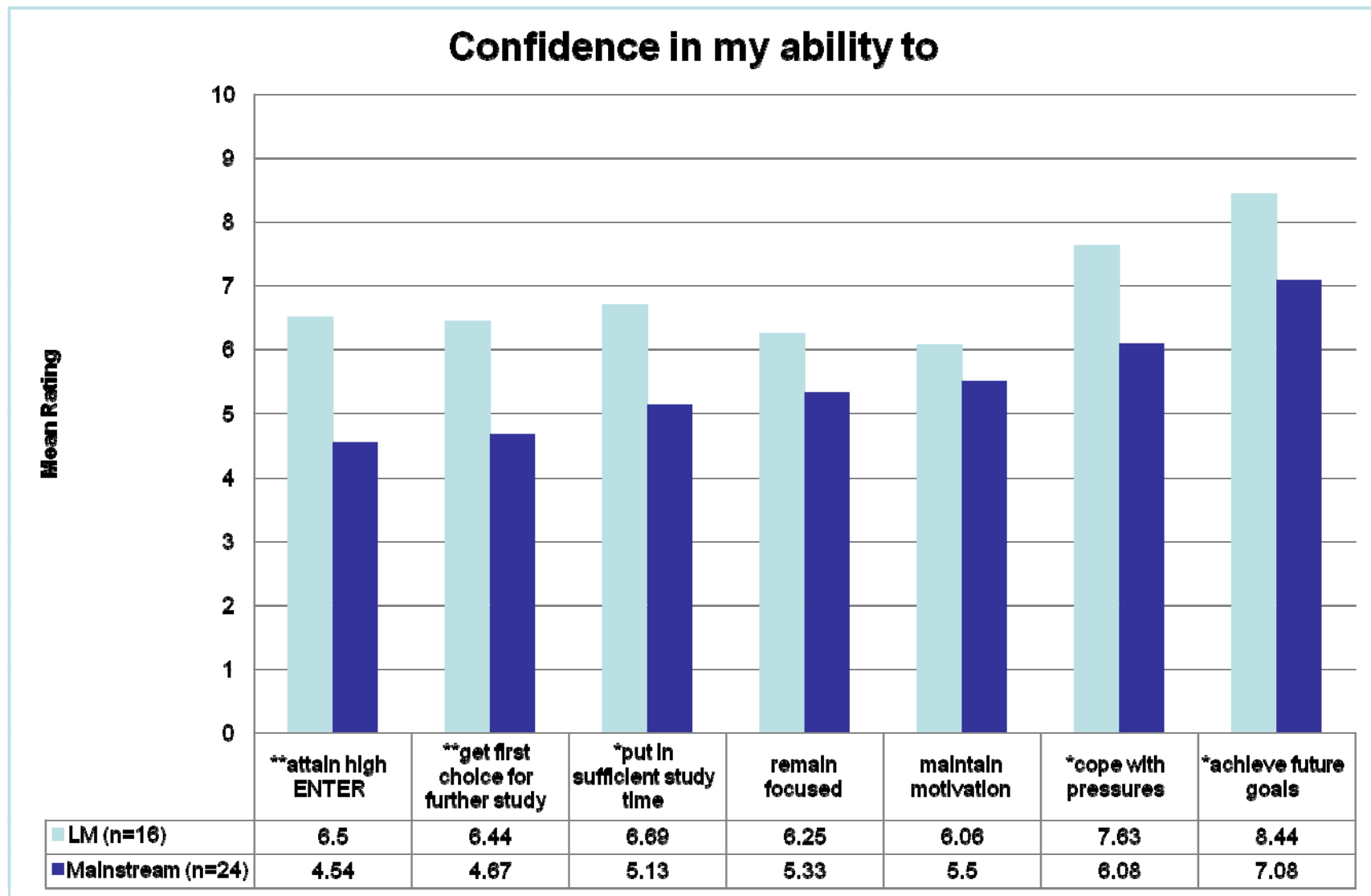
The initial study in 2002 found that while the LM group began Year 7 with slightly lower levels of self-efficacy in relation to academic capabilities, over the year they became more efficacious while the Mainstream students efficacy ratings declined.

In Year 12 the LM group still had higher levels of efficacy in relation to academic and related capabilities.

Figure 1: Total perceived self-efficacy ratings over the year (2002)



# Figure 2: Student confidence ratings (2007)



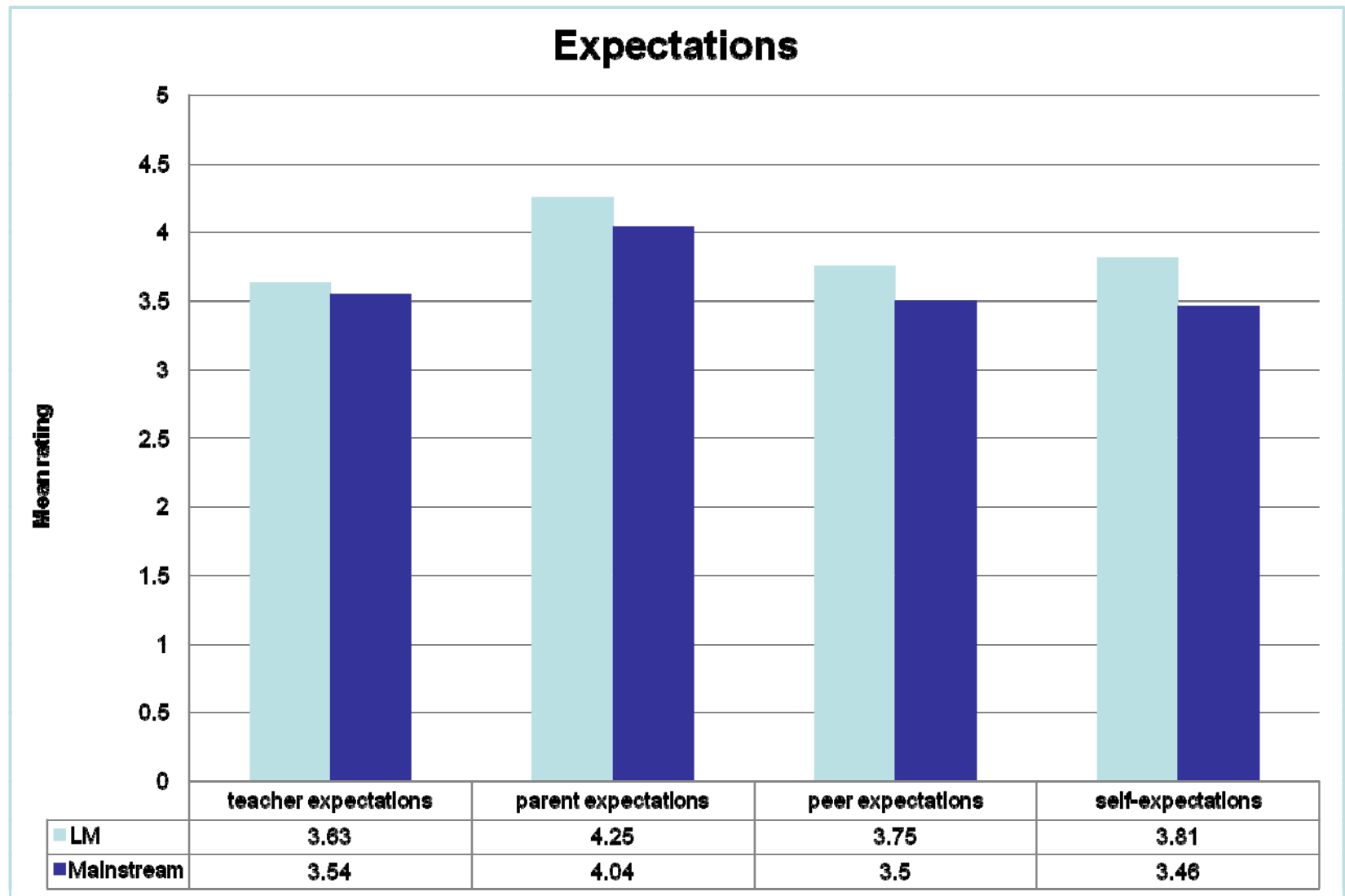
\* significant at .05, \*\*significant at .01

# Expectations

As probably expected, the LM group rated expectations from parents, teachers, peers and themselves slightly higher than the Mainstream students (none of these were statistically significant).

Other expectations that students mentioned being either fulfilled or not fulfilled related to preparation for transition into the mainstream and preparation for VCE.

# Figure 3: Perceived Expectations



# Expectations on exiting LM

An issue that has emerged in a number of studies is the lack of preparation for the transition of SEAL students into the mainstream at Year 10 or 11.

Because many Victorian government secondary schools are divided into junior and senior campuses and SEAL/AAL programs operate at the junior campus only, many of the senior staff are not familiar with the operation or philosophy of the programs.

# A number of student comments reflected this sentiment

*“At Year 10 expectations dropped dramatically - we had been expected to really try hard in our Year 9 classes so when we came to the senior campus it was so different. In my English class I was with a few others from LM and we just did nothing but still got really good marks. We had already done it all in Year 8 so we learned nothing”  
(female)*

# Preparation for VCE

*“I know it prepared me better for VCE, like even in Year 9 we were getting taught about how ENTER scores work, and scaling” (male)*

*“I think it was good preparation – VCE has been sort of easier – from talking to others, they’re struggling more with it whereas coming from a class that was always discussing it has helped” (male)*

*“It gave you really good skills like in English – we had to know all about how to structure an essay - other classes were just doing the basics – so for Year 12, I think I am better prepared for it” (female)*

# Reflections from high achieving mainstream students

There were mixed feelings among the high achieving students who chose not to participate in the LM program but rather to go into a mainstream class:

*“Well I always knew it as a smart ass class but there were times where I thought it would be easier for me to learn but I suppose being in a class where you’ve got all these distractions around you, it kind of learns (sic) you to be more controlling of yourself and more focused on what you’re doing so you can block out things – I enjoyed it , it made schooling very interesting”*

*“I think I wouldn’t have done as well in the LM class because I’m really not as gifted as they are and I would have felt stupid. So I felt it gave me confidence being in a class like that because I was getting the top grades and I liked that. But if I was in a competition when I’m against a LM class, I don’t think I would have done nearly as well – I wouldn’t have been as focused as I was in the other class as well, I think. If that makes sense”*

Another high achieving female though stated,  
*“I actually regret not doing it (LM) now because I might have had a better group of friends, like to start with and it would have motivated me to try more. They also got extended more in maths I think – I used to get individual extension but it wasn’t the same – the LM kids seem to be a lot better prepared in maths especially”*

# Some student reflections on the LM experience

*“I loved the challenge of LM – we were always pushed to do more work if we could and stuff, so yeah, I loved the LM class” (male).*

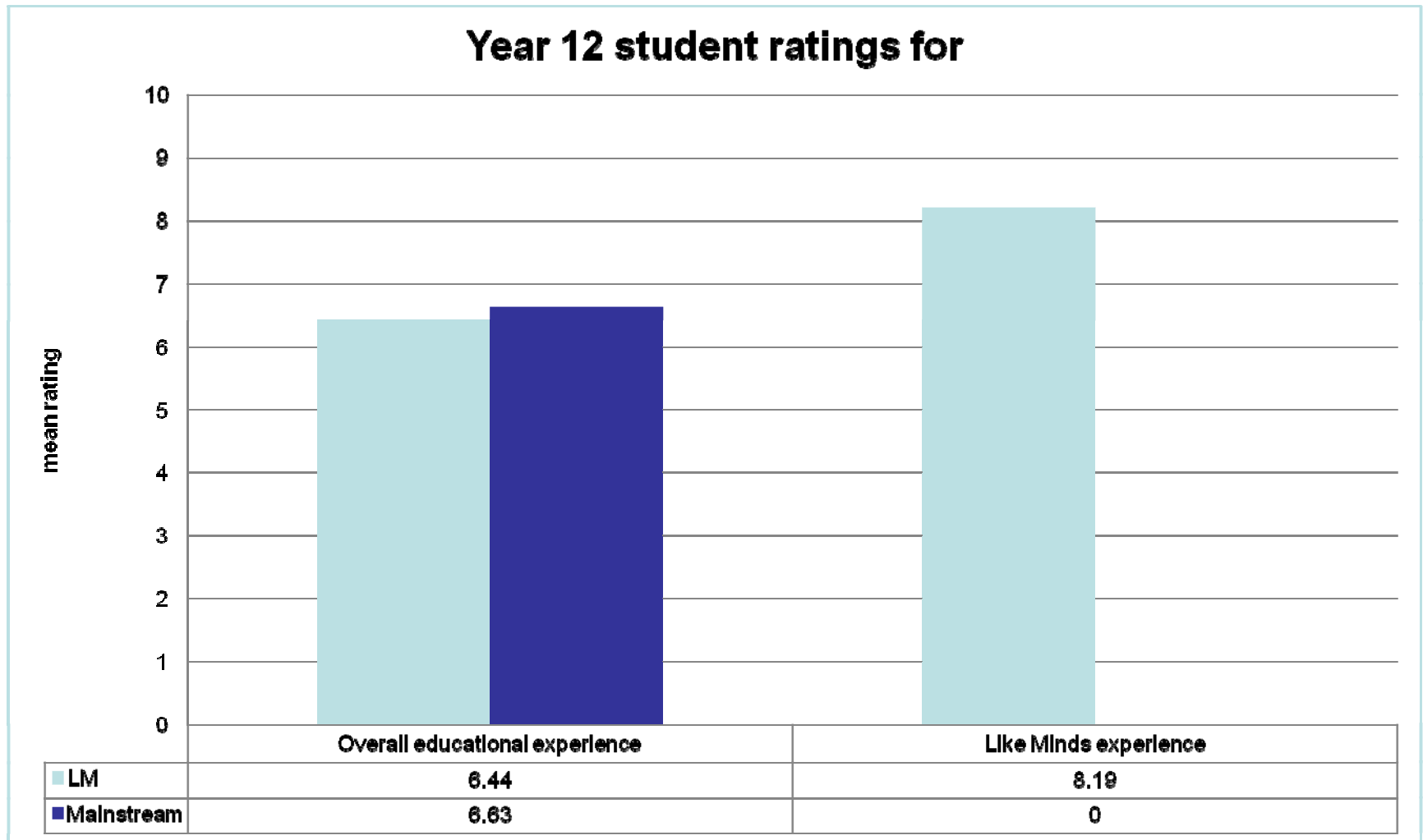
*“We were all focused on school, like even in primary school there were the kids that would always disrupt and be naughty but in LM the teachers could teach us properly because we would listen – I mean we’d still talk and muck around but because the people around me were sort of the same as me, I think it was helpful” (female)*

# Overall experience

Student ratings (out of 10) of their educational experience were reasonably positive but there was very little difference between the LM and Mainstream groups (LM  $\underline{M}$ =6.44, Mainstream  $M$ =6.63).

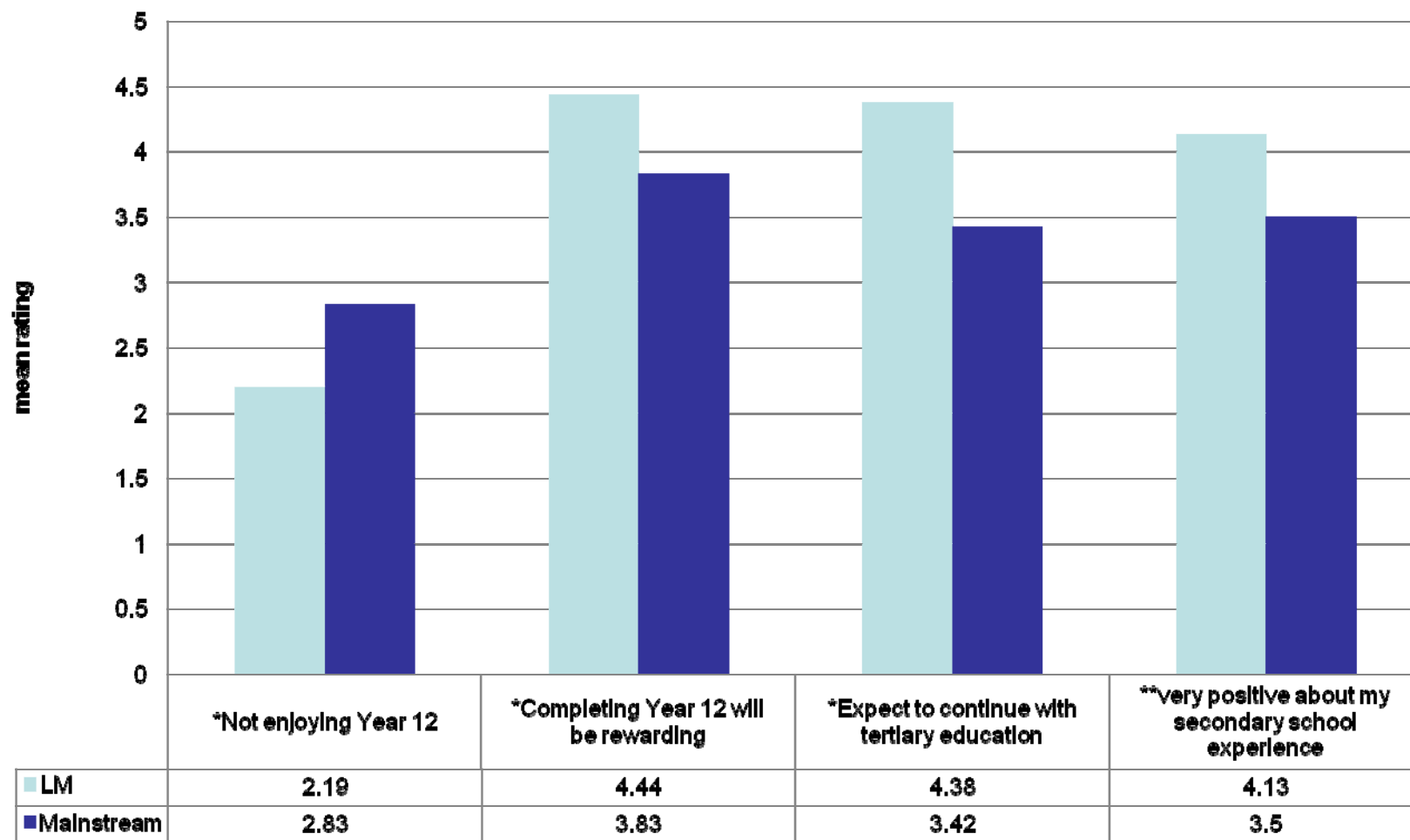
Interestingly the LM group rated their experience in the LM setting more highly (LM  $\underline{M}$ = 8.19) than their overall educational experience.

Figure 4: Student ratings of school experience/  
Like Minds experience



# Student ratings of Year 12 & beyond

**Year 12 and beyond**



\* significant at .05, \*\*significant at .01

# Conclusions from the 2007 study

From this longitudinal study it appears that the Like Minds program has been a worthwhile and effective method of catering for students with high academic ability in this rural school. All participants rated it as an experience that they would definitely repeat.

They mentioned benefits including increased motivation to work and to achieve, a work ethic that they saw as significantly different from other classes, teachers having high expectations which motivated them to work harder, and finally a healthy sense of competition among class members.

The litmus test for any special provisions of course lies in how non-participants view the situation. If they feel disadvantaged, it becomes difficult to justify yet this was not evident within this cohort of students.

Although the two groups experienced their secondary education in a different way, they both reported a similar degree of satisfaction, a result that supports this particular programming option.

**For the Mainstream sample, it was less straightforward. For while they viewed their overall educational experience as positively as the LM class; the educational encounter may have been more satisfactory for some than others as the focus of many Mainstream students was on the social rather than academic context of their class. Although a number of students in the Mainstream group considered participation in the LM class as a possible preference, no one from the LM class acknowledged a preference for membership in a Mainstream class.**

