The Secret Traders:

A case study investigating adolescent girls
and
relational aggression
and
the impacts of popularity and meanness

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the Degree of

Master of Teaching and Learning

University of Canterbury

2011

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Acknowledgments

For my nieces:

Zoë, Phoebe, Shanna and Adele.

Abstract

The importance of social status and popularity for the girls is investigated in this study. Given its importance it is not surprising that they resorted to a number of relationally aggressive tactics to maintain their popularity and social position. The girls in this study demonstrate how they emotionally invested in their friendships and in return they expected loyalty, trust and commitment. Friendships were formed through shared interests, proximity and through meeting friends of friends.

Friendships became more intimate with the sharing of information, secrets and dreams. Girls in this study entrusted their secrets like jewels to each other, they were a measure of the trust, intimacy and closeness of the friendship. The secrets had a dual purpose – particularly for this age group – where they connected with close friends on a deeper level. The sharing of secrets meant that you were a close confidant of the girl and that they would trust and support each other and would assist in navigating the harsh and tumultuous waters of puberty. However – during this time the emergence of popularity and being a popular girl gained prominence within this study. Popularity was social currency – and was seen as the necessary capital for advancement within a girl's peer group – the more popular a girl was, the more she was sought after as a friend, and the more powerful she was. Popularity and power was considered social currency with this group of girls, the more popular you were the more desirable she was as a friend, and the more powerful a popular girl's circle of influence would be.

Glossary

Adolescent Girls – for the purposes of this research "adolescent girls" are girls between the ages of 10-14 years of age.

Bullying – Olweus (2003), regarded as an authority in the area of bullying has refined his original definition (1978) to be more gender inclusive, stating; "A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" – and negative actions are described as "someone intentionally inflicting, or attempting to inflict, injury or discomfort on another. The actions can be direct or indirect." (Cited in Adair, Dixon, Moore, Sutherland, 2000).

Cliques – are "friendship circles whose members tend to identify each other as mutually connected" (Adler & Adler, 1998). They tend to be hierarchical in structure, dominated by leaders and exclusive in nature.

Dynamics - *(used with a pl. verb)* The social, intellectual, or moral forces that produce activity and change in a given sphere. (Merriam Webster Dictionary) In this case – the "forces" which influence girls and their friendships

Gossip – "Evaluative talk about a person who is not present" includes rumor, slander or simply the exchange of information (Eder, & Enke, 1991:494)

Meanness – Actions that are intended to hurt (mentally, physically and socially – see relational aggression)

Niceness – Treating peers as equals, caring about their feelings and making sure they are included (Merten, 1997, 1999)

Popular – A girl who is widely *known* and *recognized* by classmates and who is *sought after* as a friend (Merten, 1997)

Qualitative Research - Taylor and Bogden (1998:3) suggest that the key aspect of qualitative research is 'understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it'

Relational Aggression – Acts that "harm others through damage (or threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion" (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspertz, & Kaukiainen, 1992)

Indirect aggression – a type of covert behavior that allows the perpetrator to inflict pain or hurt in such a way that it seems that there was no intent to hurt at all. (Bojorkqvist et al, 1992)

Social Aggression – Rumor, gossip or social exclusion intended to damage self esteem or status within a group (Simmons, 2002)

Chapter 1

Introduction

<u>Setting the scene</u>

"Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. I'm wearing a black dress and a clock, from the dress-up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows.
Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it was not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; the terror."
 "Cat's eye" Margaret Atwood (1998)

 I suppose it was there all the time – the latent feeling of a lack of self-worth and identity – just waiting for the moment where someone could pick at it like an invisible scab. And when she did…it hurt.

As a child, I had passed through the tumultuous waters of childhood relatively unscathed. I had good friends and being fortunate enough to have brothers, was able to experience the best of both girl world and boy's world. My earliest memory of a best friend was a boy who I sat next to in every class, played with at recess and would invite to my birthday parties. Being an honorary boy and being privileged to be taught to play cricket with my brothers as we passed the afternoons in the weekend batting and bowling in

the driveway, and much to my mother's consternation – managing to mark the glass ranch sliders every time a "6" was scored – to knowing how rugby was played and lying in sleeping bags at midnight with my father and brothers roaring with delight at the television when the All Blacks would win against another team in a far flung country; to experiencing the 'sisterhood' of having female friends – and learning what was considered acceptable to fit within a same sex social group. This was perhaps, upon reflection, my biggest challenge – learning to navigate the intricacies of female friendships – where one day I would be "the best friend of..." and the next day I would be "rejected" or ejected from the group often for reasons unknown. As I moved into adolescence, I quickly learnt the ways of "playing like a girl" and "acting like a girl", knowing when to speak up and when to shut up in case I was the one who was rejected and left to sit alone in the library with my lunch and the taunts of having no friends.

 As a teacher I had witnessed the ways children decide that they belong – negotiating their identities to fit the groups they want to be a part of and those that they resisted or who resisted them. I had observed the ways in which girls bullied – taught girls who had come to me in tears as the result of being bullied, excluded by their friends and had rumors spread about them; and seen the impact upon them as they tried to negotiate the path of friendship and the need to have an identity and feel included within a group. I had worked alongside them as they identified that what they were experiencing was not due to them being deficient in some way – but a result of an abuse of power within a friendship – and observed the recognition written over their faces as they realized that this was "not acceptable". I had taught well intentioned lessons on bullying in order to reduce the harmful effects for children and had noted how my students were able to give the "right" response and yet still manage to engage in behaviors that hurt other children. I had counseled girls, distraught over being "dropped as a friend" and encouraged them to air their differences whilst keeping my fingers

crossed that they would come out of the "fight" stronger and able to face the girls who dominated them and had led them to question themselves.

Some girls, less resilient, had made major changes - to their personalities, shifted peer groups or had even encouraged their parents to allow them to "start over" and move schools. Looking back on my childhood, I supposed to some extent I had experienced being the victim and indeed the bully – read by our teachers as "girls being girls" but nothing had prepared me for the blatant and pervasive abuse and bullying that my tormentor engaged in with me.

"The Tormentor"
The bully was a person who was popular and was in a position of power and had the opportunity to abuse that power - all hallmarks of a bully. I, like Elaine, the protagonist in "Cat's Eye" identified with being in the hole, as suddenly, I had no voice and I felt my sense of worth and identity disappearing into the darkness that had engulfed me.

At first I was baffled – I questioned myself as so many girls and women do, when they are initially unaware that what they are experiencing is a form of abuse called bullying; that such "schoolgirl tactics" could be used by a woman of more senior years. As a newcomer to the environment, I felt vulnerable to someone wielding power over me – but the reasons for doing so left me astounded and confused. As in so many cases of schoolgirl bullying – the bully set about deconstructing my self-esteem and sense of worth little by little – by spreading rumors aimed at undermining my credentials, exclusion and sometimes outright verbal aggression.

Suddenly I was driven to trying to understand this phenomenon; I wanted to understand what led girls, who then grow into women, to manipulate in this manner; was it a social construction – because girls are meant to be "sugar

and spice and everything nice" that they must employ more devious strategies to remain "number 1"? Does the way that adults dismiss this form of social aggression as "girls being girls" or girls being catty" devalue the impact that it has on the victim and the ways that the bully is able to continue employing covert aggressive behaviors to eliminate a threat or a perceived threat to their position – whether it be social status or popularity? What leads girls to lose their voice when faced with such forms of social aggression? And how does someone navigate the maelstrom of puberty and keep intact a sense of self and self-worth while managing to feel connected and belong to a social group of friends?

Purpose: Making sense of the bullying that was happening to me

The effects on me of this bullying were long lasting – despite having faced what I perceived to have been more challenging situations in my life. I started reading and talking to trusted friends and other women and the conversations were as surprising as they were affirming. Many women related stories of how they had been the victims of indirect aggression and bullying at the hands of so-called friends or colleagues. Many related that it had impacted upon them in terms of self-image and identity and for some the struggles were raw and ongoing.

I delved into the literature to find not just the forms of meanness and bullying that girls employed - as it seemed to me that we were well aware of those – but to search for something deeper….why do girls/and women employ these strategies and to what extent are we socialized to behave in a way that is indirectly aggressive – rather than "just having it out". It seemed that to "have it out" was to risk everything that was valued by girls; friends, popularity, status and belonging.

My first foray into the complex world of "same-sex socialization" – was through the eyes of feminist ethnographers Rachel Simmons, Valerie Hey, Carol Gilligan and Vivienne Griffiths. I was struck by Simmons' interviews with girls who had been the victims of social aggression by their peers and the impact that it had on their self-esteem and the way they subsequently conducted and negotiated their friendships with other girls and women. As I have proposed - much of what goes on with this socialization in pre-adolescent and adolescence tends to get passed over – but when you talk with women about their experiences, memories and reflections on these years, a different answer emerges.

My purpose is to explore the relationships of girls and the way that they interact in terms of friendships, popularity and meanness and their relationship to bullying. This shaped what were to become my research questions. Those best placed to answer questions about meanness, popularity and bullying were the very girls who were in the throes of establishing their identities – teenage girls. At the same time I was beginning to formulate my research questions – the mass media were investigating the same type of issues through the production of films such as *Mean Girls* and *Heathers.*

I also hope to offer some guidance to educators for the need for role modeling, honesty and transparency in relationships between girls so that those who were bullied, excluded or on the outer could communicate and voice those feelings without further fear that they were "at fault" or in some way deficient.

Researcher presence, positioning and bias

In acknowledging at the beginning of this chapter that the nature of this research initially started out as deeply personal, I have chosen to signal my position, bias and presence as having a significant bearing on this research. I

have therefore have chosen a feminist theoretical framework which acknowledges my presence and experiences within the research – but also allows for the voice of the participants to determine the direction of the analysis and discussion.

Morweena Griffiths asserts that the first precept of feminist critique is that knowledge must be grounded in individual "experience", "perspectives", "subjectivity" or "position in a discourse". (1995, p. 60). Traditionally mainstream research discounts the use of "personal experience," perceiving it as being irrelevant or contaminating the research's objectivity (Reinharz, 1992, p. 258). However, feminist epistemologies have been developed in response to the devaluation, silencing and oppression of girls and women which other epistemologies underpin. Therefore in choosing to view through the lens of a feminist critique I am aware of my bias and seek to objectively address it throughout the research process – whilst acknowledging that "starting from one's own experience" is the catalyst for entry into "girl world", the setting for my participants' views on what it is like to be a girl.

My position in this research is multiple. I am a fledgling feminist researcher, a teacher, a student, a pakeha woman, and an aunt to four young girls entering adolescence and seeking to understand the friendships and relationships they engage in with other girls. In my previous experience as a teacher, I had witnessed the ways children decide that they belong – negotiating their identities to fit the groups they wanted to be a part of and those that they resisted or who had resisted them. I am fully aware that my past experiences being the victim of bullying/relational aggression brings with it a bias that potentially taints the data I have gathered. The crucial issue was how my subjectivities influence the way I acquire, analyze data and then interpret that knowledge 'truthfully' (Pillow, 2003).

The answer lies in my ability to be reflexive about my research and to acknowledge my bias and subjectivities throughout the research process. Charlotte Davies (1999, cited in Pillow (2003, p. 178)) states that:

> In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the way in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and the process of doing research

Feminist research points out that there are a number of places in which to be reflexive and that these are throughout the research process. Denzin and Lincoln (1998), Pillow (2003), Peshkin (citied in Pillow, 2003), and Reinharz (1992) all suggest that it is important that the "researcher know thyself" and seek out subjectivities throughout the entire process not just in the writing stage. It is this "critical consciousness" that in turn will better represent, validate and legitimize the research.

Pillow (2003) also suggests that feminist researchers seek to capture the "essence" of their participants through the choice of their methodology (such as focus group interviews). Semi structured or focus group interviews allow participants to to speak for themselves – their 'voice' becoming a measure of validity.

Developing reciprocity with my participants, giving opportunities for them to "voice" their ideas is vital. Being aware of my own power (as a researcher, lecturer and teacher), and reflecting honestly upon my position at all stages of the research should enable my authority over the work to be deconstructed and that the story that is told, is in fact the voice of the participants. Understanding what is happening for the participants in the context in which they are speaking – is at the heart of my research. As Spivak suggests (1990, p. 59, cited in Griffiths, 1995, p. 41), "for me the question 'who should speak?' is less crucial than 'who will listen'?" It is only then with more dialogue that I

believe that there will be, as Spivak so aptly asserts, "the likelihood of real change and disruption to original assumptions and perspectives". (ibid)

At the heart of feminist theory is the desire to represent the *value* of women's lives in a non-exploitative manner (Pillow, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Rapport is a key factor in relations with the participants in the interviews however I tend to agree with Reinharz, that it is possible to achieve 'rapport' with participants without necessarily having 'intimacy' with them. Respect, openness, a willingness to share information and clear communication are, I believe, important tenets of this research project.

My research will investigate importance that girls attach to their friendships and how this influences the ways in which they treat each other. Of interest to me is also finding out how girls construct and maintain alliances in these friendships and the negotiation that occurs (eg bullying, to ensure that these friendships are maintained or safeguarded). In this study I utilized the techniques of survey (to initially discover themes in girls' relationships) and focus group interviewing, to gain an understanding of the dynamics within girls' relationships. I also kept an interview journal – for dual purpose, one being to note any themes, gestures, hunches and non-verbal interactions between the girls in the focus groups that may add to a greater understanding of the meaning they attach to friendships and bullying (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The second, and perhaps more critical purpose for keeping the journal, was for reflexivity. How do I empower the researched if I am not aware of my own subjectivities and the part I play in the collective struggle for true representation? The journal I believe is an essential part of keeping the information true and valid.

Context for Research

"In 10 years people who are popular are just going to be like, whatever… but people who are bullied really badly sometimes will still be affected you know…"

Hey (1997), (supported by other researchers such as Adler and Alder, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Merten, 1997) suggests in her ethnography that not only do social institutions play a part in the social constructions of girls friendships that in fact the girls themselves are the 'cultural agents' who determine the borders of their relationships.

Girls have a critical role to play in forming and changing the culture of their cliques and friendships. Many of the reasons that girls exclude others and don't talk to each other are that they are afraid that they will lose the friendship of the person that they are confronting (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Crick, Bigbee & Cynthia, 1996; Hey, 1997; Leckie, nd; Simmons, 2002). Girls have been socialized not to deal with conflict in an overt and physically aggressive manner leaving them no option but to use their friendships as weapons. The challenge therefore for educators is to critically examine gender relationships and engage in dialogue about what bullying is for girls. Only then, when values, ideas, attitudes and beliefs have been examined, can we in dialogue with the girls themselves start to reconstruct positive and effective ways of dealing with 'girl on girl' conflict.

It is the aim of this thesis to examine the social relationships of girls in regard to the ways in which they bully. The context of studying adolescent girls from International schools in Japan was chosen primarily because I was at the time, living and working in Japan and not having enough language skills to conduct interviews within Japanese schools. However as other studies have shown, bullying is not just a phenomenon of one particular culture. New Zealand researchers, Adair et al. (2000), cited examples of research carried out in

England, Scotland, Australia Canada, Norway and the United States, all drawing attention to the pervasive nature of bullying in schools.

It is my intention to try to understand the dynamics of the social networks of the girls in this study, to investigate the concepts of popularity and meanness and to look at how these impact on and influence girls' bullying. Furthermore, I hope to be able to apply these findings from my research to a New Zealand context and look at the way we as educators can encourage girls to explore ways to deal with conflict and competition using open and honest approaches.

The school

The data for this research was collected from an International school in one of Japan's largest city. The community in which the school is situated is a middle to upper class suburb characterized by a large number of different nationalities.

The students

The students who entered with informed consent into this study were adolescent girls. Approximately 100 girls completed the qualitative questionnaire and three groups of friends opted into the focus group interviews. I had groups of four naturally occurring friends and through informal conversation began to understand where each member positioned herself within the group. The composition of the groups and selection is further explained in Chapter three.

<u>Overview of thesis format</u>

This thesis is arranged into six chapters. Chapter one sets the scene and purpose for writing about the "Secret Traders." Chapter two reviews the key literature around the key themes of bullying, popularity, meanness and girls' friendships. In Chapter three I discuss the research programme including the data collection methods and the ethical issues that were dealt with. I also describe my sources of data and the analysis that was undertaken. In Chapter four, the girls' voices come to the fore and I present the data and the key themes and indicators that emerged from the data analysis. Chapter five seeks to synthesize the data and discusses my key findings in light of my literature review. In this chapter I also discuss the limitations of my findings. Chapter 6 concludes my thesis, and restates the key findings in my study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Relational aggression and the ways in which girls utilize it, came to gain publicity in the public arena through the release of the film "Mean Girls." This film drew heavily on the book entitled "Queen Bees and Wannabes" by Rosalind Wiseman (2009) in which she depicts "girl-world" as a "jungle" with a strata of friendship cliques all trying to outdo each other. This simplistic view of girls and their social interactions including relational aggression needs to be expanded and this is the aim of this literature review. One of my primary aims was to look at the key constructs that define girls' friendships, trust and love and how popularity, meanness and the relationship with *girl talk* lead to relational aggression and indirect aggression in these friendships.

My specific research questions were developed to show an understanding of the ways in which girls form and maintain relationships and how bullying occurs within these friendship groups or as a cause of them. The key questions I asked were:

1. How do the dynamics of girls' friendships influence the ways in which they bully?
2. How do girls perceive they construct their friendships? How does this impact upon the ways in which they bully?
3. What do girls perceive as bullying?

Relevant Research and Theory

The overall aim of this study is to explore the phenomenon of girls' bullying and the ways in which girls' bullying influences how they maintain and develop their friendships. I aim to ascertain if girls recognized that they bullied and were the victims of bullying and the reasons behind the bullying. I also aim to explore if girls understood that they used relational aggression tactics and to what extent this influences the friendship groups they socialized with.

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section sets the scene by examining the nature of bullying and draws upon international and New Zealand research and signposts articles in the media that have piqued interest in girls and bullying. I will introduce the terminology and the definitional issues around bullying, relational aggression and friendships. In the second section, there is a more in depth look at the literature around girls' friendships. Thirdly, literature around the cycle of popularly and meanness will be discussed. And finally, I will look at the topic of "talk". I will discuss literature around gossip, ordinary talk and confiding talk.

There is a growing body of literature that reports that bullying has an impact on girls and continues to undermine their relationships with each other. Much of the research around bullying has largely been conducted in Europe and Australia demonstrating that bullying is not just a phenomenon of one particular culture.

In Yoneyama and Naito's (2003) research on bullying (ijime) in Japanese schools note that the research by Morita, Taki and Hata (1999b) in which they state that the "Japan[ese] classroom (and not the schoolyard) is the main venue of peer victimization, where some 75% of the bullying among school students occurs" (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003, p. 320).

All schools have bullying to one degree or another, however the serious nature of a number of high profile incidents involving girls and bullying has lead to an increase in public perceptions and awareness of violence in schools. Only recently 70 children watched as a 13 year old girl was lured into a Wellington park, badly beaten by an older girl and left semi-conscious. Adding to the seriousness of incident – the attack was filmed by mobile phone and uploaded and sent to other pupils, in a sense re-victimizing her again (Dominion Post, 2009). A 15-year-old pupil at a College in Wellington was tormented by text messages for more than six months in 2007. She developed an eating disorder, lost 12 kilograms and spent three weeks in hospital (ibid). In one of the most distressing incidents, the day before school started in 2006, Alex Teka was found dead in the back garden of her Putaruru home. The 12-year-old had been the target of text bullies. Since about July of 2005, Alex had been bullied relentlessly by a group of girls not much older than her. Her mother Deanne Teka described it as an orchestrated campaign by email and text (www.stuff.co.nz, 2006).

A recent report on safety in New Zealand schools by the Office of the Commission for Children (2009) highlights high levels of physical and emotional bullying in New Zealand compared to other countries. New Zealand schools were rated amongst the worst category in the world for

bullying, with rates being more than 50% above the international average (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2008, Cited in the OCC, 2009).

Definitions of bullying and abuse and relational aggression

A post-modern, feminist, social constructivist perspective demands that bullying and the use of intimidatory practices must be examined in light of the social, cultural and economic aspects as well as the behavioral antecedents. The key theoretical lens I am using throughout this research is feminist, and the micro theory that threads through is social constructivism. In chapter three I discuss feminism and social construction in more detail.

The effects of bullying on students are pervasive and are destructive to the psychological health of the individual. Wilkinson and Marmot assert that there are ten different but interconnected aspects of the social determinants of health. The two that particularly pertain to the issue of bullying are social exclusion and the harm to lives that it causes and social support, and the need to feel connected and belong (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2001). Bullying research reveals that children who are victimized rate more poorly on measures of psychological well-being than their peers. Bullied children suffer low self esteem; unhappiness at school; isolation from peers and high levels of depression including suicidal tendencies (Olweus, 1978; Perry et al, 1998 cited in Owens et al. (2000); Rigby and Slee, 1992). Olweus' original 1978 definition of bullying has been modified now to include the more covert forms of aggression used by girls that a variety of researchers, including Leckie,

(n.d), Crick et al (1996) and Owens et al (2000), are turning their attentions to. It is generally agreed that bullying "is recognized to be a stable, ongoing, intentional, one way form of violent activity, involving a power relationship between a victim who feels helpless and a perpetrator who has control." (Olweus, 1978; Rigby (1996), Slee,(1993), Smith (1991) and Tattum (1989) cited in Leckie n.d).

These hurtful actions and violent activities can be defined as: 1. Physical actions, such as hitting and punching; 2. Verbal abuse, such as name calling (including racist, sexist name calling), teasing, taunting and threatening; 3. Indirect, including social exclusion from friendship groups, or spreading rumors and gossip so as to damage self esteem (Bojorkqvist et al, 1992; Raskauskas and Stolz, 2007; Simmons, 2002).

Much of the international and local research of bullying of children has focused on overt or direct methods of victimization, usually perpetuated by males. (Olweus (1978, Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000; Rigby, 1996). Batsche and Knoffe, 1994 (cited in Adair et al, 2000, p. 217) allude to this as a significant variable and that, *"bullying has frequently been limited to only readily observable acts leaving out the more psychological harassment such as social exclusion and isolation that is prevalent in schools"*. While Rigby and Slee (1992) to some extent concerned themselves with more traditional forms of bullying such as physical and verbal bullying, a 1995 study by Rigby included questions directed more at girls, with interesting responses that highlighted the impact of being purposefully excluded. Eder (1985) in an ethnographic study of early adolescent girls discovered a cycle of popularity in which popular girls moved up the social status and then lost their popularity because they were resented. Although she did not

specifically refer to relational aggression, the jealousy of popular girls and the talking that went on behind their backs was deigned to be harmful and therefore clearly aggressive. Adler and Adler (1998) and Merten (1997) saw inclusion and exclusion as integral to girls' cliques. Adler and Alder identified girls as being "egalitarian but emotionally vindictive" while boys lives tended to be "conflict filled but emotionally uninvolved" (p. 157).

Behaviorally, there are two forms of bullying that girls tend to engage in. Indirect bullying – such as rumors and excluding others which Finnish researcher Bjorkqvist et al (1992) asserts is *"a kind of social manipulation; the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in the attack." (*Cited in Owens et al, 2000, p. 360) The other form of behavior is relational aggression, which is defined by Lagerspetz et al (cited in Simmons, 2002, p. 21), is to *"harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion."* Peer victimization is called relational aggression because of the deliberate psychological exclusion and manipulation that aims to damage peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Owen, Slee & Shute, 2000; Raskaukas and Stolz, 2004 & 2007).

Relational aggression is bullying that is characterized by psychological attacks, for example humiliation, and manipulation of friendships and relationships. Relational bullies use gossip and rumor to threaten relationships and the social standing of the victims. They use rumor and

exclusion from important social activities to accomplish bullying (Crick et al, 2002; Espelege & Swearer, 2003; Raskauskas & Stolz, 2007).

Crick and Gropeter's seminal research on relational aggression (1995) uncovered gender differences. They developed a scale to measure overt "relational aggression" which is similar to the definition of indirect aggression cited above. Crick and Gropeter found that girls tended to use relational aggression rather than more overt forms (Owens et al, 2000). Further studies by Galen and Underwood (1997), (in which they referred to indirect aggression as social aggression) found similar trends in gender differences, and revealed that the use of indirect aggression became more evident during the teenage years.

Research demonstrates that relational aggression and indirect aggression should be acknowledged as having an impact on girls. The proportion of students who engage in physical bullying tends to reduce with age, whereas the number of children (girls) who use verbal and indirect forms of aggression/bullying, tends to increase through childhood and adolescence. Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Kaukiaanen, 1992, (cited in Raskauskas and Stolz, 2007; Sullivan 2000a), and Crick and Gropeter (1995) identified that girls feel more emotionally distressed by relational aggression incidents that do boys (Owens et al, 2000).

One reason girls feel more distressed by this form of bullying is that *"when attempting to inflict harm on peers (ie aggression), children do so in ways that are best to thwart or damage goals that are valued by their respective peer groups."* (Crick & Gropeter, 1995, p. 710). I would tentatively theorize that one

of those goals is peer popularity and high status amongst their friendship group.

Alongside the more traditional forms of bullying, the more contemporary tools of bullying have involved technology and cyber bullying either by text messaging/pix messaging and/or social networking sites such as My Space, Bebo and Facebook. This is considered in many ways both verbal and relational aggression. Adolescents today use mobile phone technology to establish and maintain social relationships. However, conversely, they can be used negatively to bully via texting as seen reported in the media. The mobile network is being used to harass, threaten, humiliate and intimidate peers (Raskaukas & Stolz, 2007).

Electronic bullying can be considered unique from the other forms of bullying in that the aggressors (or bullies) are removed from their victims and in many ways are unaware of the impact of their words and actions (Ybarra and Mitchell cited in Raskaukas and Stolz, 2007). The creation of multiple identities on line and by phone means that the identity of the bully might not be known. With the nature of the electronic era allowing a person to have 24 hour availability or access, electronic bullying is pervasive in that it is not limited to the school day or school ground. The victim can be bullied even in the safety of their homes without the knowledge of parents and other significant adults perhaps making it a greater threat to psychological health than traditional forms of bullying (Raskaukas & Stolz, 2007).

Economies of Friendship.

Recent feminist works on schooling and girls (Hey, 1997; Griffith 1995) suggest that girls are "subjected" to social and cultural pressures that reinforce a gendered way of behaving. During the age of adolescence researchers suggest that girls prize their social relationships more than schooling and school achievements (Eder & Enke, 1991; Hey, 1997; Merton, 1997) and that much of the tension in girls relationships at this time in particular, relate to identity, normality, positionality and power in the construction of their friendships. Many of these ideas are explored below in literature regarding friendships, however it is important to clearly define what is meant by economies' of friendships within the context of this research and identify the links between normality and power.

Hey suggests that adolescence is a time when girls discover their identity and struggle to find where they fit within a shifting network of relationships including others, economic and social conditions and ideologies of how girls should "normally" act within their friendships and at school (Hey, 1997, p. 27). At a time in their schooling were many girls feel disempowered it is their social and cultural power within their friendship groups, which have them jockeying for position as the most "desirable" friend. Their social status within these groups is determined by their popularity as a friend, which is highly prized, and their ability to retain power dependent upon being nice, and also being mean (Hey, 1997, p. 135). Walkerdine determines that this tenuous power relationship within girls' relationships coupled with their desirability to popular "means that they enact certain positions and ways of being in order to invest in being normal", (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 138). She

suggests that girls are evaluated in terms of their "performance of friendship" which organizes the moral and social economy (ibid). How girls negotiate social contracts and make transactions that position them as popular or powerful within their friendships is discussed in the review of literature below.

Friendships

While there is a wealth of material and research on the effect that bullying has on the lives of victims, research into girls' social relationships, their friendships and the link to relational aggression has been rather meagre.

Vivienne Griffith's (1995) ethnographic research involved participant observation and interviews with adolescent girls and their friendships over the course of a year in a mixed comprehensive British high school. Griffiths describes it as a "Celebration of friendships", with the main findings of her research describing that close friendships of girls were based upon trust, loyalty, and the confiding of secrets or problems. (1995, p. 5). Griffiths examined how and why girls made friendships and suggested that most friendships are formed because essentially humans don't want to be alone and that friendships were essential for social development and assisting in forming girls' self-identities (1995, p. 26). Proximity, continuity, shared interests, academic attainment, race, ethnicity and social status are all key factors in establishing and maintaining girls' friendships (1995, p. 30). Griffiths suggests girls remain friends by shared experiences and shared activities like talking together, having a laugh and showing loyalty and support for each other. The

breaking of trust, jealousy and being nasty all lead to *serious falling out* and disruptions to friendships. Griffiths suggests that this breaking of trust and spreading of rumors largely contributes to these disruptions (1995, p. 90).

Valerie Hey in "The company she keeps: an ethnography of girls friendships" (1997), discusses girls' friendships through a feminist theorist lens, with the benefit of a three year longitudinal study of two London schools in the 1980s. In alignment with other social researchers, Hey suggests that there is a strong link between the relationships of power, culture and schooling. Her argument "insist upon seeing girls' (friendship) lives as invested in the production of certain forms of power and subjectivity" (Hey, 1997, p. 23) and that the girls themselves play a critical role in shaping their lives and subjectivities.

Hey notes that recent feminist work on girls links definitions of power with definitions of femininity through the concept of positionality. Hey explains Linda Alcoff's work (1988) as conveying a "concept of positionality through the complex concept of identity and selfhood through refusing an essentialized account of femininity." (1997, p. 28)

Hey herself had expanded upon the concept of positionality as "not just a concept of place and power, it is also conceptualization of a discursive economy in which different groups of subjects can try and do position and out-position each other through using their access to differential resources of social, economic and cultural power" (1997, p. 8). Linked to this is Epstein's ((1993) cited in Hey, 1997, p. 28) discussion of post-structivist theory, "… power is not always wielded through coercion, but

often through discursive practices which people, as active agents within these practices either consent to or resist." Hey suggests that at the central premise of girls' friendships in this economy are: reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing (1997, p. 65).

Research by feminist psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown & Carol Gilligan (1992) also studied girls 'voice' in their qualitative research in schools in the United States. Their longitudinal study, which consisted of interviewing not only the girls but the parents and teachers at schools, proposed that the adolescent age –"The Crossroads" – marks a developmental crisis between girls and women which is marked by a series of disconnections and a loss of voice. Their accounts of girls are told through this metaphor of voice – girlhood, signifying a confident voice, adolescence – diminished or un-voiced to womanhood - a loss of voice. Interestingly this lack or loss of voice in adult women is commented on in an article by Jenni Russell in which she says of adult women friendships:

> …we very rarely challenge our friends. That's because friendship is often a delicate affair and we don't want to tax it with too many demands. It's more common to absorb the hurt and retreat. After all, there's no contract. The terms are unwritten, and nobody ever makes them explicit*"* (Russell, 2005, p. 29)

Hey, 1997 (supported by other researchers such as Adler & Alder, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Merten, 1997) suggests that not only do social institutions play a part in the social constructions of girls' friendships but in fact the girls themselves are the 'cultural agents' who determine the borders of their relationships.

Girls have a critical role to play in forming and changing the culture of their friendships. Many of the reasons that girls exclude others and don't talk to each other are that they are afraid that they will lose the friendship of the person that they are confronting (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Crick, et al, 1996; Hey, 1997; Leckie, nd; Simmons, 2002). Girls have been socialized not to deal with conflict in an overt and physically aggressive manner leaving them no option but to use their friendships as weapons. The challenge therefore for educators is to critically examine gender relationships and engage in dialogue about what bullying is for girls. Only then, when values, ideas, attitudes and beliefs have been examined can we in dialogue with the girls *themselves start to* reconstruct positive and effective ways of dealing with 'girl on girl' conflict.

Popularity and meanness

Seminal ethnographic researchers on girls social relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Crick and Gropeter, 1995; Crick, Bigbee & Howes, 1996; Hey, 1997; Merten, 1997;Owens et al, 2000; Simons, 2000) contend that girls' use of the power of *popularity* and *meanness* (particularly in their teenage years) are fundamental to manipulating and controlling relationships in their sphere.

Eder's (1985) research on the cycle of popularity draws upon earlier research that finds that teenage girls are more concerned with popularity than they are with academic achievement or success. Rosenberg and Simmons (1975) (cited in Eder, 1985), found that the desire to be well-liked and subsequent lack of interest in success at school, developed in early adolescence and was marked by an increase in self awareness and

self consciousness. Eder (1985) herself contends that this self consciousness is related to the change of schooling – from elementary to middle school, combined with a larger school population and more extracurricular activities which provide greater opportunities for friendships and a change of status within one's peer group (1985, p. 155).

Eder's (1985) research, a participant observation ethnographic study of early adolescence, examined how changes within girls' relationships with other girls contribute to this new found concern with popularity and a decrease in concern for academic achievement and success. She discovered a "cycle of popularity" where popular girls moved up in social status the more they were recognized, known and visible within the school context. However this level of popularity was met by resentment by those who were not as popular and the girls lost their popularity by being seen as "stuck up" or "snobs". Merten (1997) also refers to this as the "paradox of popularity". Often this resentment and anger towards popular girls was masked by smiling.

While Eder never explicitly refers to aggression, the jealousy and talking behind backs were clearly intended to harm social relationships and friendships and were therefore relationally aggressive. Meanness was tied to jealousy and payback and was often used as power over someone who was a threat to the status quo. Eder explains that friendships with popular girls are tied to, and are important social avenues for peer status. The more popular a girl was, the more other girls courted her friendship. This inextricable link between self esteem and interpersonal relationships was not without its complexities as Eder explained that girls often would be friendly to and befriend people they did not really like to maintain

their popularity and social status. If a girl's social status should plummet, so too would her popularity and that of her friends.

Merten's longitudinal ethnographic research on girls, in particular on a clique termed the "dirty dozen," revealed the paradox of meanness and popularity – both of which translated into power. He contends that "popularity is as problematic as it is desired" (Merten, 1997, p. 188). When something is highly valued (popularity) and cannot be openly expressed – alternative forms of expression such as gossip, rumor, and indirect and relational aggression are invoked. Merten suggest that *meanness* evolves from the "failure of culture to allow hierarchy to be celebrated" (1997, p. 188). Girls, Merten contends, are socialized to be non-aggressive, and non-physical in their behavior – anger is rarely articulated and open competition is frowned upon.

The tension between competition and conflict to gain or maintain friendship was ever present in girls' relationships. Hey and Merten assert that there is an ideal that popular girls were also nice. When girls didn't meet these standard by being friends with everyone they were thought of as being superior or stuck up. In order to maintain popularity and power, Merten suggested that some girls would target those who were threats to their status or popularity, by being mean, spreading rumors and excluding them from social situations (Merten, 1997). Wielding power over peers through being mean was another way of maintaining popularity. Popularity and meanness, Merten suggested, have the common denominator of power.

Talk: Ordinary talk; Secrets; and Gossip

In her seminal ethnographic research of adolescent girls and their friendships, Griffiths surmised that close friendships between girls were based on trust, loyalty and confiding secrets (1995, p. 5). Talk was central to their friendships and to the actions that were taken to maintain those friendships. Talk, Griffth concurred, was generally regarded to fall within three distinct groups; ordinary talk, confiding talk (secrets) and gossip.

Ordinary talk was characterized by a sharing of information. What girls talked about depended, Griffith found, on the age of the girls. While younger girls often linked play and talk about everyday experiences, teenagers tended to spend a lot of time discussing teenage culture; movies, fashions and magazines. As well as discussing shared interests, Griffiths found that girls would talk around the planning of future events, for example what they were going to do together in the weekend. As the girls got older some of this "ordinary talk" would also centre around boys; boys they liked; boys they would like to date and comparing notes on current boyfriends (1995, p. 66)

Confiding talk, Griffiths asserted, was often characterized by sharing experiences with deeper emotional attachments (1995, p. 66). While ordinary talk reinforced friendships between girls, confiding talk often took the friendship to a deeper level of intensity. Secrecy however was critical as if a secret was shared, the girls were aware that this put them in a vulnerable and exposed position. (1995, p. 67). Trust was essential in sharing secrets and the ultimate betrayal and hurt was sharing the secrets.

Merten (1999) takes the enculturation of secrets further in his two year ethnographic study of junior high school girls. Through interviews and participant observation, Merten found that secrets were inextricably linked to friendships, and that the ability to keep a secret was near the top of the list when contemplating what made a desirable friend (1999, p. 119). The sharing of secrets demonstrated a deeper level of intimacy within a friendship and created a feeling of trust. He went on to mention that girls judged the depth and closeness of friendships by the willingness of the friends to share information.

However, Merten also concurred that possessing a secret regardless of its content was often more powerful than the secret itself. "Socially ambitious girls were not only inclined to leave current friends for more popular girls but often used previous friends secrets as "gifts" to their new friends." (1999, p. 123). Merten also goes on to explain that secrets are like a monetary currency (reflecting Hey's economic currency theme), that when shared can promote a girl's social positioning and popularity within her peer group. Knowing a secret, he suggests, is tantamount to "owning it" and deciding how one will "spend it." "Girls bought their way into new relationships by revealing their previous friends' secrets. Using secrets in this manner symbolized the termination of the previous friendship and the initiation of a new one." (1995, p. 133) Merten concludes that the same level of closeness which brought about self disclosure could be used as depersonalized social currency to improve a girl's social placement and positioning (1999).

Gossip is defined in Eder and Enke's seminal research into the subject as "evaluative talk about a person who is not present." (1991, p. 494). Eder and Enke's ethnographic research into the structure of gossip predominantly focused on naturally occurring friends (most of the groupings were female with three of the 8 groups being male). They found that the key elements that identify gossip were "the identification of a target" and "an evaluation of a target." (1991, p. 497. Eder and Enke also found that after identification and evaluation occurred, a variety of "acts" such as explanations, support, expansion, exaggerated affect and challenges also occurred (1991, p. 497). On the whole the main topics of gossip amongst adolescent females centered on female appearance, and "conceited" behavior of girls (Eder & Enke, 1991, p. 506). They also concluded that much of the gossip was overwhelmingly negative – due to the structure of gossip episodes which generally start off with a negative evaluation or statement.

Eder and Enke (1991) also looked at the impact of social status on gossip. They found that: gossip was initiated primarily by adolescent who had high or medium status within their peers groups; that challenges were made only by those who had a status level equal or higher than the person they challenged; and that supportive responses were made by adolescents of all status levels; including those perceived as having low status within the peer group. While it is suggested that gossip promotes social bonding, Eder and Enke suggest that it is "unfortunate that gossip also promotes agreement that individual differences are negative." (1991, p. 505)

Chapter 3

Methodology and Data

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design with a thorough review of the research methodologies used. I will first background the research with respect to the qualitative methods used and discuss my perspective through the lens of a feminist researcher. I will then discuss the data collection methods with particular emphasis upon the focus group interviews. Ethical issues that evolved throughout the process, I will then discuss as will I address the issues of trustworthiness. I then conclude the chapter with the techniques and processes that I used to analyze the data.

Methodology

My belief that knowledge is socially constructed and that the research seeks to gain an understanding of the social processes that influence and reflect the experiences and perspectives of my participants, is reflected in the questions that I have asked in my research. Social constructivists view the social world as "socially, politically, and psychologically constructed, as are human understandings of the physical world. They triangulate to capture and report multiple perspectives rather than seek a single truth" (Patton, 2001, p. 546).

I have chosen to view this research through two lenses – interpretive and feminist. In taking an interpretive approach by interviewing my participants in their natural settings of school, I seek to understand how they create, maintain and interpret their social world of friendship and how this influences their understandings of bullying/relational aggression. I have also chosen to view the research through a post-modern feminist lens – believing that looking at a number of perspectives allows me to explore the ways in which girls construct their friendships and the ways in which these constructs influence the ways in which they relate to each other and bully.

Taylor and Bogdan suggest that the key aspect of interpretive research is "understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it" (1998, p. 3). They also suggest that individuals construct their own views of the world and that there are multiple ways of interpreting these experiences. The ways in which we give meaning to, or interpret these experiences, or how they are constructed, can be understood by employing a range of techniques such as interviewing, participant observation, document analysis and life histories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

My research investigated the meaning that girls attach to their friendships and how this influences the ways in which they treat each other. Of interest to me was also finding out how girls construct and maintain alliances in these friendships and the negotiation that occurs (i.e. bullying to ensure that these friendships are maintained or safeguarded).

In understanding the nature of my participants paradigm; what they value in friendships and how they come an understanding of what friendship means to them; it was necessary to analyze and interpret these social interactions through a phenomenological approach.

A phenomenological research approach is an "attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). In understanding a particular phenomenon, researchers who subscribe to this approach don't claim to know what things mean to those they are studying - but emphasize a desire to understand the subjective aspects of people's behavior and the meaning they – the participants, construct around their lives. "Phenomenologists believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available through interacting with others, and that it is the meaning of our experiences that constitutes reality." (Greene (1978) cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 26).

The research questions in this study are concerned with the meanings that girls attach to their friendships and the ways in which they form and maintain them; their perceptions of popularity and meanness and how this leads to the ways in which they bully.

In my research I identify as a feminist – therefore acknowledging that the world is not "directly knowable" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 33) but that is influenced by many other factors. In terms of my theoretical lens – I align myself with post modern feminism – believing that society is socially constructed – and that there are multiple constructions depending upon the views and experiences of the participants being

researched. (Williams & Sheehan in Carpenter, Dixon, Rata & Rawlinson, 2001, p. 216). Post –structural feminism seeks to dispel the notion of binary's in interpreting the lives and social interactions of males and females.

At the heart of feminist theory is the desire to represent the *value* of women's lives in a non-exploitative manner (Pillow, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Rapport is a key factor in relations with the participants in the interviews however I tend to agree with Reinharz, that it is possible to achieve 'rapport' with participants without necessarily having 'intimacy' with them. Respect, openness, a willingness to share information and clear communication are, I believe, important tenets of this research project. My experience as a teacher and experience in teaching interpersonal skills with adolescents in health education assisted me throughout the focus group interview process.

Understanding that there are a range of perspectives when understanding why girls bully; how they construct their identities and use techniques of popularity and meanness to maintain and manipulate their friendships are the hallmarks of postmodern feminist theory. Pillow (2003) also suggests that feminist researchers seek to capture the "essence" of their participants through the choice of their methodology. Semi structured or focus group interviews allow participants "to speak for themselves" – their 'voice' becoming a measure of validity. The methods of case study – including the tools of focus group interviewing, survey and an interviewer's journal are typically employed by feminists to understand the data they have collected and in my case study – to begin to comment on an emerging theory about girls and their social interactions.

The Case Study

This case study reflects an *instrumental case design* described by Stake (2003). Stake determines that it is the contexts that are to be scrutinized and that the case study itself is secondary to providing an insight into a particular issue and in facilitating our understanding of the issue to be investigated. In this research it is the participant's understandings of what bullying is and how popularity and meanness are perceived. The original meaning of case design offered by Merriam (cited in Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) is a "detailed examination of one setting, or single subject, or event" (1998, p. 54). The case study for this research follows this and shares these traits – one school; one class and one subject - bullying.

Case study design was utilized to determine the perspectives that girls have on their friendships and perceptions of 'meanness' and 'popularity'. It is these perspectives and the interactions of the focus group participants that are of interest in this research and may provide 'meaning' and some understanding of girls' interpersonal relationships. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) see case studies as providing a context which is "unique and dynamic… hence case studies investigate and report complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, (and) human relationships" (2000, p. 181).

It is these interactions and the subtleties that I hope to explore, interpret and gain some understanding from, and which will provide some baseline ideas from which further research into relational aggression between girls can be thoroughly investigated. This is the great strength of

the case study -- that the researcher is able to "concentrate on a specific instance or situation and to identify, or attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work" (Bell, 1999, p. 11).

Generalizability is often a drawback associated with case studies. Bogdan and Biklen (1998, p. 67) give the example of case study researchers who choose so called "typical situations" in order to claim generalizability. However for researchers who are concerned with individuals and the meaning that they make of their lives – generalizing seems to be redundant as there is no "correct" way to interpret the data or a given situation. Janesick (cited in Denzin and Lincoln 1998) suggested that traditional ways of thinking about generalizability are inadequate. She asserts that replicability is pointless in qualitative research and that the value of the case study is its uniqueness. Stake (2003) emphasizes that case studies are indeed that – single cases that draw attention to a specific phenomena and what can be learnt from that specific single case.

This case study focuses on interpreting the "meaning" behind girls' bullying; discusses popularity and meanness, and attempts to understand the notions of friendships and how they are maintained with these specific students. In interpreting what the children have to say about these notions of meanness, bullying, popularity and friendship, generalizations or "relatability" (Bassey cited in Bell, 1999, p. 11) may be able to be made to other research subjects and settings. Bassey suggested that the concept of relatability is more important than generalizability as a criterion – being able to judge whether the details are sufficient and appropriate for others working with a similar situation (Bassey cited in Bell, 1999, p. 2).

Letting the case tell its story is a critical strength of the qualitative research approach – and is essential in understanding the perspectives of the participants and the reliability of the decisions made in this case study. The story in this research is that of the participants and their knowledge and ways of knowing how they form friendships; interact with their friendship groups; behave and manipulate to keep their status and the status quo of their own friendship group.

> We cannot be sure that a case, telling its own story, will tell all or tell well – but the ethos of interpretative study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong (Stake, 2003, p. 144)

This research by no means gives a defining view of how girls interact and bullying and its limitations will be investigated in this thesis further.

Research Design

This case study is a "snapshot" of three groups of friends who shared their impressions of their friendships at a particular moment in time. I chose three data collection methods - with the Qualitative survey giving me a "taste" of what the participants knew; the focus group interviews providing a real "feast" of information; and the interviewers journal – a way of recording my ideas and questions throughout the entire interview process.

The data sources were:

- **Qualitative Survey:** students' responses to a generalized survey on friends; bullying; popularity; and meanness to get a "feeling for" the viewpoints of the respondents

- **Focus Group interviews**:   three focus group interviews involving myself and students who had given consent to be involved in the research

- **Interviewer's journal**: documentation from comments I made in a journal about decisions made; hunches; and reflective comments on the process, methodology and emerging analysis of the data before, during, and after the focus group interviews were conducted.

Each of these sources is described in detail below.

In this research I utilized the techniques of qualitative questionnaire (to initially discover themes in girls' relationships) and focus group interviewing, to gain some understanding of the dynamics within girls' relationships. I also kept an interview journal – for dual purposes but also to note any themes, gestures, hunches and non-verbal interactions between the girls in the focus groups that may add to an enhanced understanding of the meaning they attach to friendships and bullying. (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The second - and perhaps more critical purpose for keeping the journal, was for reflexivity. How do I empower the researched if I am not aware of my own subjectivities and the part I play in collective struggle for true representation? The journal I believe is an essential part of keeping the information true and valid.

Qualitative Questionnaire

Questionnaires are a widely used and useful tool for collecting survey information, often providing numerical data and being able to be administered without the researcher and analyzed in a relatively straightforward manner (Cohen, et al, 2000).

Survey research is used to generate a snapshot of a group's attitudes, values or behaviors at a given time (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). In feminist research there is ambivalence towards the survey research method – with some finding it a useful way to do research - and espousing the virtues of multiple data collection methods and others showing deep distrust (Reinharz, 1992, p. 76). Feminists have used surveys to draw attention to issues and problems – and have used this methodology to highlight that an issue was more widespread than originally thought. However much of the criticism of the methodology comes down to the fact that a range of factors including gender often influences the way a respondent answers (Reinharz, 1992, p. 87). Much of the critique of the research survey method is leveled at the questions themselves. Reinharz notes that with the links between language and gender in the choice of wording used in a survey is of particular significance.

While much has been made of the weaknesses of qualitative surveys, when used alongside another data collection method such as focus group interviews, it provides a "dual vision" when exploring girl's views on friendship. The qualitative questionnaire allows the participant to respond anonymously – thereby giving an insight into the perspective

she has. Gaining a deeper understanding of what girls understand of their friendships, and the constructs of popularity and meanness through the focus group interviews provided the opportunity to provide a useful synthesis of ideas in this research

In the case of this research, I employed a qualitative, less structured word based questionnaire that has open-ended questions (Cohen, et al, 2000) that allowed me to get an initial "feel" for what the participants understand of the concepts of "friendship", "bullying", "meanness" and "popularity". It also allowed me the opportunity to frame questions that emerged to be followed up in the focus group interviews.

The questionnaire was administered to approximately 100 girls who had opted freely into the research study and had also obtained parental consent. It was conducted by the researcher (me) – and I was able to provide any additional information - in the performing arts hall of the school in the school in which the participants attended. The aim of the questionnaire, is to shed light onto some 'researchable data' and thus make decisions about the initial structure and running of the focus group interviews without 'preempting' what might be talked about within these groups.

Focus Group Interview

> For qualitative researchers, focus group interviews are group interviews that are structured to foster talk among the participants about particular issues.
> (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 108)

Semi structured or unstructured interviewing has gained prominence amongst feminist researchers as a principal means by which researchers actively involve their participants in the construction of data about their lives (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). The interview process affords researchers the privilege of "discovery" and "description of the ways in which participants understand their realities and allows for the researcher to generate theory from that meaning. Interviewing offers the opportunity to access thoughts, views and opinions in the participants own words – rather than that of the researcher.

Focus group interviews are a powerful way of gaining insights into the viewpoints and attitudes of a slice of the population (Davidson & Tolich, 1999, p. 231). The purpose of using focus group interviews was to stimulate talk about girls' friendships, popularity and meanness from a range of perspectives. As Bogdan and Biklen (1998, p. 109) identify, participants are encouraged by their conversations to articulate their views and in some cases to actually realize what their views may be on a particular subject.

The design of this research is centered on Focus Group Interviewing. Krueger (cited in Litoselliti, 2003) describes focus groups as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment" (2003, p. 1). I have chosen focus group interviewing as a way to gain an understanding of the students' perspectives of bullying; to try and ascertain what they know about the dynamics of their friendships; and to try and understand the values that they place on these friendships or aspects of these relationships.

Group interaction is the key difference between focus group interviews and structured interviewing. It is the dynamics of the group, their interactions with each other through the exchanging of anecdotes; the spoken and unspoken messages and body language or gestures, and the flexibility to explore a range of points of view through open-ended questioning that makes this form of data collection attractive. Kitzinger (1995) asserts that one advantage of focus group interviewing over one to one interview is the interview process itself which allows people to clarify their views. She also goes on to state that the selection of those groups is of primarily consideration.

Focus groups traditionally range in size from 4 to 10 participants (Krueger in Litoselliti, 2003; Kitzinger, 1995). Most researchers agree that homogenous, naturally occurring groups obtain the best 'interactions' in focus groups as the members can relate comments to shared experiences in their daily lives. Kitzinger (1995, p. 301) also emphasizes that they may 'challenge each other on contradictions between what they profess to believe and how they actually behave' One reservation that she does point out which is something I was acutely aware of when of conducting the focus group interviews is the group hierarchy structure and how 'false consensus' may affect the data.

Greenbaum (1993) suggests that researchers make decisions on group size based upon manageability. He states that "Some researchers prefer to use mini groups to full groups because they feel they can gain more in-depth information from a smaller group" (1993, p. 3). With the shortage of appropriate participants available to me in my research

environment – such a decision was made to keep the groups small and focus on quality of the groups and data rather than quantity.

I had groups of four naturally occurring friends and through informal conversation began to understand where each member positioned herself within the group. Litoselliti (2003) suggests that clear guidelines when setting up the focus groups is essential. Clarifying that it is "ok" *not to reach consensus* and that *each opinion is valued* is an integral part of the set up process. The interviewer's journal took on an importance of its own in triangulating the information – by noting 'hunch moments' – interpreting silences, body language and visual clues that the group members engage in with each other during the interviews.

My role in the setting was as 'moderator' of the interviews. Litoselliti (2003), Krueger (cited in Litoselliti, 2003) and Kitzinger (1995), emphasise that the moderator's role is a crucial role – not only do they need to have an in depth understanding of the topic that is being discussed but also be aware of and be au fait with the culture and traditions of the focus group – particularly in understanding the nature of teenage girls and their social hierarchies. Krueger notes that it is advantageous for the moderator to be the researcher – thereby having control of the methodological aspects of the study (such as participant selection, development of questions, analysis) and can also control manipulation – either by group members or others benefiting from the research.

One of the main disadvantages to this type of interviewing is that what is gained in stimulating talk can be to the detriment of the quality of the

data. Individual members can be dominant in discussion – therefore it was important that my role as the researcher was also that of moderator and facilitator – at times, with varying amounts of success.

Litoselliti, Kitzinger, and Reinharz all agree that careful planning combined with skills of the interviewer to *listen* and *hear* the participant are essential to the success of focus group interviewing. Due to the cultural setting I was living in, my limited skills in the Japanese language and the relative scarcity of students to interview – piloting the focus group interviews was not an option. Litoselliti states that piloting is advantageous as the researcher gains an understanding the type of content and themes that may emerge; learning about the dynamics of group interaction; and the focusing on practical aspects of running a discussion (such as room arrangement, the quality of recorded sound and participants reactions to being recorded) are critical before running the focus groups proper.

With the inclusion of the *Mean Girls* DVD clips it was important to ascertain where in the interview it would be appropriate to show and discuss. (Note: *Mean Girls* is a movie – 2004 - which has been inspired by the book "*Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends and other realities of adolescence*" by Rosalind Wiseman). I chose 4 clips which linked specifically to the themes of "forming friendships", "being popular" and "being mean".

The choice of three focus groups was to provide insights from a range of perspectives as to what the girls perceived as bullying and if they believe

the construction of their friendships and employing techniques as being mean or popular, was construed as bullying and relational aggression.

With the permission of the children, parents, teachers and school the focus group sessions were tape recorded to collect data and a detailed interviewer's journal written as soon as possible after each of the interviews (see below for further explanation).

The Interviewer's Journal

The interviewer's journal was an important source to support the data collected from the transcripts of the focus group interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) assert that the journal can be used for a variety of purposes including recording the topic of discussion in the interviews and specific conversations or themes that occurred as well as hunches, reflections and note patterns that occurred. The inclusion of field notes in the form of an interviewers journal, not only provided me with the opportunity to capture the nuances of the interviews that the tape recorder couldn't pick up, such as the description of the participants, the setting, and the observed interactions that were non-verbal, that were reflective.

Reflective field notes were essential in this case study. Being aware of the setting as the researcher it is important at times to step back from the emotions of being immersed in the setting and reflect on the method, procedures that were used the evolving data analysis and emergent theory, as well as the ethical dilemmas and conflicts that occurred throughout the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 122). The researcher's frame of mind is also of note. It is important to understand

the assumptions, values and perspectives that a researcher brings to the project – the interviewer's journal was a critical tool in unpacking and acknowledging my own bias and attitudes to friendships throughout the process.

The journal also served a dual purpose. A key reason for keeping a journal is also to make note of the themes, gestures, and non-verbal expressions that add understanding to a person's words and the context that these words were spoken (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Holstein and Guber (cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 115) hold the view that the interviewer acts as "'an ethnographer of the interview," who records for future analysis not only what was said but the related interactional details of how the interview was accomplished".

Criticism of qualitative research often lies in the assertion that the researcher is heavily involved in the design and implementation of the research project. Acknowledging the "observer effect" in the research process (in this case the "interviewer effect") in the field notes is an attempt to capture and understand those subjectivities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p124).

Maintaining reflexivity through field notes, reflecting on the process and participants in the interviewer's journal, being "aware" of my assumptions and "monitoring" these subjectivities in an honest and transparent manner is critical to my integrity as a researcher. Peshkin ((1988) cited in Pillow (2003), p. 181) aptly puts it:

> If researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their research, they can at least disclose to their readers where

self and subject became joined. They can at best be enabled to write unshackled from their orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process.

Key issues for decision and consideration were **site selection, access and ethical considerations.**

The setting

The selection of the research site was an important consideration. My preference was to access a school that had students with a high level of English language as my own personal Japanese language skills were limiting. I also wanted the students to be fully cognizant of information that was provided by me in English and knowledge of what 'informed consent" meant and that they could choose to withdraw from the process at any stage during the research programme.

This research site was an International school in one of Japan's major cities. The school is characterized by students from a range of cultures and ethnicities from high income families. My first contact with the school was through a letter of introduction sent to the principal. He then invited me to meet with the principal of the middle school and the two school counselors.

The purpose of the initial meeting was to outline the background to the research, the purpose of the research, the way that I had proposed to structure the data gathering and to address any ethical issues that the principal and school counselors had. Further interviews with the school counselors ensured that they too were familiar with the research purpose

and structure. They were also pivotal in gaining access to the students and ensuring that the informed consent forms signed by both the children and parents were in order before the data gathering began.

Ethical Considerations

> Ethical decisions do not belong to a separate stage of the interview investigations, but arise during the entire research process. (Kvale, 1996, p. 110)

Throughout the research process ethical considerations were paramount to each decision that I made. Conscious decisions to make sure that I followed a "Do No Harm" approach were crucial in gaining the trust and respect of not only the school principal and counselors but the participants in the research themselves. Ethical considerations about the relationship between the participants; the methodology; the type of interviewing and procedures to be used; informed consent; confidentiality of interview materials and survey data; were all taken into account and planned for before the data collection commenced.

Understanding my own position as a researcher and my ethical responsibilities, were important throughout the research process. Eisner and Peshkin (1990) believe that the researcher requires two attributes – a *sensitivity* towards the research and participants and the ability to identify an ethical issue; and the *responsibility* to act appropriately with regards to ethical issues.

Throughout the research the key ethical question I considered was "What are the *beneficial* consequences of the study?" (Kvale, 1996, p.

119). It was necessary to weigh the potential risks of investigating the nature of friendships and bullying with the benefits for the participants and the potential benefits of the research. With my supervisors I discussed the strategies that I would use that would mitigate the risks involved in researching the subject of friendships which for adolescent girls is seen as a critical and formative part of their school lives.

Choosing to use the *Mean Girls* DVD vignettes assisted the participants to express feelings that they might not otherwise articulate (Greenbaum, 1993, p. 112). This also allowed the participants to "distance" themselves somewhat from their own personal experiences while still allowing them to comment and give their views on a situation without necessary disclosing information that they might later regret. This tactic that Greenbaum terms "*Situational associations"* are "very similar to personality associations in that they too employ pictures to stimulate responses from the participants" (Greenbaum, 1993, p. 112).

Confidentiality of the participants was assured at all times during the research process. In terms of confidentially of the interviews and research process – I was able to guarantee that only I and my supervisors would have access to the transcripts. However – one of the potential risks was that the participants themselves breached the confidentiality requirements – by discussing the interviews afterwards.

> "Where consent is required it is never sufficient to have the consent of the Board, the principal, or the parents. For legal and prudential (and sometimes ethical) reasons, these are often required but are

additional to the consent of the child" (Davidson & Tolich, 1999, p. 75)

The importance of having informed consent from the research participants was paramount to my honesty and integrity within the research. Kvale (1996, p. 110) asks, "With school children, the question arises as to who should give the consent – the children themselves, the school superintendent, the school board, the teacher, or the parents? Informed consent also involves the question of *how much information should be given and when."*

Previous research in New Zealand by Alton-Lee and Nuthall was a guide in terms of ethical issues. During the "Understanding Learning and Teaching Project" these researchers sought and gained the consent of the children participating in this research (Alton-Lee, 1999). Using this format as a guide, I also asked for the written consent of the children who wanted to participate in my research.

Throughout the process it was crucial that I keep in mind that the students' lack of experience with research might mean that they were unaware that certain aspects of their participation (i.e. disclosure of personal information) could be harmful to them. It was in their best interests that at all times, I "did no harm" and adhered to the researcher responsibilities of responsibility and sensitivity.

Researcher's Role

My role in the setting was as 'moderator' or 'facilitator' of the interviews as discussed earlier. Pillow (2003) also suggests that feminist researchers

seek to capture the "essence" of their participants through the choice of their methodology (such as focus group interviews). Semi structured or focus group interviews allow participants "to speak for themselves" – their 'voice' becoming a measure of validity. Developing reciprocity with my participants, giving opportunities for them to "voice" their ideas, sharing the data, and allowing them to co-construct the research, was vital. Being aware of my own power (as a researcher, lecturer and teacher), and reflecting honestly and ethically upon my position and the decisions that I made at all stages of the research enabled my authority over the work to be deconstructed and that the story that is told is that of the participants.

Conducting the case study

The research programme that was undertaken is summarized in Table 1. I will also further explain details pertaining to the relationship with the school; my relationship with the children, how the research was carried out, and the ongoing decisions that I made with the participants in terms of ethical issues.

TABLE 1

Phase	Purpose	Participants
Preliminary Introduction letter to the school	Gaining access	School Principal (s) researcher
Initial school visit	Gaining access Planning the data collection	School principal Counselors Researcher
Data Gathering Pre questionnaire	Describing the research Establishing knowledge and attitudes Allowing for an opportunity for girls to elect to go further in the research by participating in focus groups	Counselors Students Teachers Researcher
Focus group interviews (3 groups)	Establishing students perceptions, knowledge and attitudes through DVD vignettes (Mean Girls DVD)	Students Researcher

Relationship with school management

In order for me to gain access to the participants and understand their meanings of friendships and the way that girls interpret relational

aggression – the collaboration of the school management was essential. Prior to approaching the school I had made key decisions around who would give consent. Clearly for legal purposes – the consent of the school management was essential, as was the consent of the parents of the students involved in the research process. However previous research with children in New Zealand by Alton-Lee and Nuthall was a guide for me in terms of ethical issues and I also asked for the written consent of the children who wanted to participate in my research.

I initially approached the school principal with a written letter outlining my research; the purpose and research techniques. After a face to face interview I was then encouraged to discuss with the two school counselors ways in which I could carry out the research including who would be researched; informed consent and who would give consent; and how the students would be chosen.

The role of the school counselors was also critical. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) identify that the principal is usually the key "gatekeeper" and that the support that is given is crucial in smoothing the granting of research in school. In this research, I found that the school counselors took on the role as "gatekeepers" and my interactions and the rapport that I built with them were critical to gaining access to the participants.

With the backing and in the presence of the school counselors I led a session outlining the research – with approximately one hundred girls from the middle school (aged 10 – 14years of age) who had parental permission to take part in the survey. During this session I also outlined the second stage of the research – which was to conduct focus group

interviews with friendship groups of participants. The school counselors were pivotal in collecting the consent forms of the girls and parents who wanted to be involved in the second stage. I had also discussed with the principal and school counselors the need to have a "safety net" for the participant, to minimize the potential risks to the participants, as I wasn't on site every day due to my teaching commitments elsewhere.

The two counselors and myself agreed upon their role in this aspect of the research and at the beginning of each focus group interview I asked each participant to write down the names of two people they trusted who they could talk to if the interviews brought up issues for them or their friends. I also mentioned that the girls could always approach the counselors who had shown that they were aware of the research process by being "present" during the initial discussion and the session during which I administered the survey.

The preservation of confidentiality was an important issue. Whilst the school counselors where pivotal to being able to gain access to the students and knew who volunteered to participate in the focus groups, they were also not privy to the contents of the data. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) make the point that the researcher must be careful of sharing the information with others at the research site – as that information could be used for personal or political gain (1998, p 50). The school counselors and I were in agreement - that should I consider that a child be "harmed" or "not safe" then I would make a decision as a researcher to reveal this to the counselors so that action could be taken. This was also made explicit to the participants and parents of participants in the research in the "parent /child participant information letter":

"To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants will not be referred to by name in any written documentation and all raw data will be destroyed at the end of the project. The only exception to this is if the researcher believes the participant is in any danger. If this happens, professional ethics requires that this will be discussed with the supervisors for guidance. One of the supervisors will contact you to discuss what steps will be taken." **Parent/child participant information letter**

Relationship with the Children

> Other researchers, such as feminist methodologists, have advocated for a less hierarchical relationship between interviewer and informant, and sometimes shared decision-making and authorship (Reinharz, 1992).

The students who consented to participate in my focus group interviews were drawn from a grade 7 class – who ranged in age from 12 -14 years. The three groups of students in the research were friends and of mixed ethnicity – although one group of friends identified themselves as purely "Japanese American". Initially I had considered forming focus groups with girls from a range of grades – but this seemed to be an ungainly way of trying to get the best representation of perspectives. Additionally, using groups of friends meant that I had access to a richer range of data that included their interactions with each other through the exchanging of anecdotes; the spoken and unspoken messages and body language and other nuances that were particular to those friends.

The importance of having informed consent from the research participants was paramount to my honesty and integrity within the research.

Participants were selected only if they had given their informed consent in writing prior to the commencement of the research. Before the research process I sought the written consent of the parents/guardians of the children and the school principal. At all times during the research I reserved the right to withdraw children if I felt their 'safety' was at risk or compromised.

Withdrawal from participation in the research was an option for the participants. The students were fully aware in written and verbal form that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without reason. The qualitative questionnaire was designed also to protect the identities of the students participating – and they could choose whether or not to fill it in anonymously. I negotiated the audio taping of the focus group interviews with the school management and also with the participants themselves. Initially the students were aware of the digital recorder but as soon as we got involved in the discussions and began to get into the "flow" of the interview they soon appeared to forget it was there.

The premise of the focus group interviews was to get a range of perspectives from girls as to what bullying was. Prior to the focus group interviews, the counselors and I were able to identify a safe and comfortable setting for the interviews. I had also carefully combed through the surveys for themes and comments of interest that I could probe with each of the groups to gain an understanding of their thoughts. For example one of the participants in answering a survey question mentioned that "popularity was like a war". I was able to use

this and linked it to the *Mean Girls* DVD clip that also discussed being popular.

During all stages of the data collection I felt it was in the best interests of the research participants to be fully informed. At the end of one focus group interview I mentioned again that I would change their names to protect their identities. I had outlined this clearly in the participant information and also prior to undertaking the research – particularly the focus group interviews. Protecting their contributions, identities and anonymity was crucial to "doing no harm" and I had informed them prior to the interviews that I would protect their identities and use a pseudonym to protect who they were. Throughout the process it was crucial that I keep in mind that the students' lack of experience with research might mean that they were unaware that aspects of their participation could be harmful to them. It was in their best interests that at all times, I "did no harm".

This negotiation with the students is a hallmark of feminist methodology – with a less hierarchical relationship between interviewer and informant. At times – the decision making and authorship is shared (Reinharz, 1992).

Carrying out the research

The qualitative questionnaire was designed to gather some initial understandings of the knowledge, attitudes and perspectives of the students and the ways they interpreted their friendships; bullying; meanness and popularity. The design of the questionnaire allowed for

confidentiality with the respondents opting to remain anonymous or to give their names. The open-ended questions allowed the students to further elaborate on their answers if they so wished. The responses then provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews that I then conducted with those who chose to participate in the focus groups.

As I have mentioned earlier the structure of the focus groups was with three groups of 4 students who were friends and who had knowingly opted into the research programme. In choosing to use focus groups as the main source of data collection, I hoped that the rapport that I would develop with the girls and the fact that they were friends would enable them to bounce ideas off each other that would lead to interesting discussions about bullying. The vignettes that I had selected from *Mean Girls* were also to ignite conversation amongst the girls. Two of the three focus groups having viewed the movies before, and so approached clips with an understanding of the types of themes I was hoping to get their perspectives about..

Adhering to an open-ended and less structured interview schedule was a key to fostering talk amongst my participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As much as the focus group interviews seem to be unstructured much thought was given framing the interview with regards to the setting, the questions asked and developing rapport with the participants (Bell, 1999; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Tolich & Davidson, 1999).

I structured the interviews using the three part guide described by Tolich and Davidson (1999, p. 138). I started with:

1. An introduction of the purpose and introductory questions
to get the participants talking

2. Used <u>recurrent themes</u> in the DVD *Mean Girls* clips –
(friendships, popularly, bullying and meanness) to get the
participants views, interpretations and observations of these
themes.

3. Used generic prompting and probing to encourage the
participants to give me a deeper understanding of their
comments

Using recurrent themes lay at the heart of the interview and where I believed the best researchable data was contained. Following Greenbaum's idea of using situational projectives – a tool used to help the participants express feelings that they might not otherwise articulate – I carefully selected 4 clips from the DVD *Mean Girls* to stimulate conversation and interpret ideas about friendship, popularity, meanness and bullying. I had viewed the movie a number of times prior to the interviews and had the key themes summarized as questions and probes before the focus group interviews. To use Cohen's metaphor of fishing – rather than having a conversation with my focus groups it was more like a carefully planned fishing expedition – with careful preparation, patience and an understanding of the environment in order to get a good catch (Cohen cited in Bell, 1999, p. 136). The danger of structuring the interview guide too tightly is that the participant is restricted from telling her story (and in this case give her perspectives) in her own words. Much of the focus group interview was open-ended – with the intention of treating the participants like "experts" and encouraging them to share their own views and observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 107).

Crucial to the focus group interviews was my role as the researcher/ interviewer. There has been much written in researcher attributes. Establishing rapport, good listening, anticipating what your participants might say, and importantly, being empathetic and sensitive (Glesne, 1999; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The question that I asked myself is who I would be as the interviewer, "friend, stranger, neither, both?" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 27).

At the heart of feminist theory is the desire to represent the *value* of women's lives in a non-exploitative manner (Pillow, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Rapport is a key factor in relations with the participants in the interviews however I tend to agree with Reinharz, that it is possible to achieve 'rapport' with participants without necessarily having 'intimacy' with them. The rapport that I developed with the participants in my focus group interviews was built from using my interpersonal skills as an educator and as fellow female investigating issues about girls and women. I was neither a friend nor a stranger – but took great pains to make sure that I was not also seen as an authority figure.

Respect, openness, valuing the contributions of the participants and a willingness to share information and clear communication were, I believe, important tenets of this research project and allowed me to build rapport and community with my participants in the focus groups.

Small, but subtle sharing of personal information (for example sharing that I have nieces around the same age) gave me a sense of common ground and understanding with the participants – without overloading

them with the assumptions and ideas about girls' friendships I brought to the focus group interviews and swamping them with my personal background. Interestingly at the end of one of the interviews I mentioned that I had a ten year old niece who was interested in watching the DVD. The final response from one of my more dominant and most responsive participants was:

"Don't let her watch that 'cos she's gonna become mean" (Student 3 focus group 3)

Ongoing ethical decisions

> The interview inquiry is a moral enterprise: the personal interaction in the interview affects the interviewee, and the knowledge produced by the interview affects our understanding of the human situation. (Kvale, 1996, p. 109)

The central aim of my research was to gain an understanding of what girls considered were the important features of their friendships and how they safeguarded, practiced and maintain their relationships in light of other influences such as popularity, meanness and bullying. Not only in the focus group interviews were ethical issues at the fore but throughout the entire research process itself. I am going to outline some of the ethical decisions that I made throughout the process and discuss why these were critical to my feminist premise of not exploiting those I have chosen and have chosen to participate in my research project.

Early on my research design as I have mentioned earlier was the theorizing of **why** I should conduct this research project and how to design the project so that it would lead to an improvement of the situation around relational aggression for girls (Kvale, 1996). At all

stages the three ethical guidelines opined by Eisner and Peskin (1990) cited in Kvale, 1996) were considered; informed consent; confidentiality and consequences. I have dealt with informed consent at length above and am going to look at the some of the decisions made during the research in terms of confidentiality and consequences – which also links to the "do no harm" concept.

The interview situation was the trickiest area when it came to ethical decisions. Prior to setting up the interviews I identified the possible risks to my participants and how best I was going to minimize them. The greatest risk of the focus group interviews was that seeking an understanding of friendships and relational aggression with groups of friends could potentially lead to tension within those friendships and fallout between the friends. How could I interview girls about their own perceptions of their friends and offer them a safe way of exploring the intricacies of popularity and meanness without causing some degree of trauma and stress? Focus group interviews could provide the forum for indirect aggression – that could be felt by the victim but overlooked by me as the researcher – due to a lack of knowledge of the dynamics of these specific groups of girls.

To minimize the potential risks I sought out a tool that could be used to encourage the participants to talk about girls and friendships and relational aggression – without necessarily having to discuss their own situations. Initially I had thought of using vignettes from Rachel Simmons book on relational aggression entitled "Odd girl out". However, finding the DVD *Mean Girls* was to prove fortuitous. Not only did it address the issues of girls friendships, including the key themes of

bullying in a humorous context (bullying = "girl on girl crime"); but it had been used by the counselors of the school with some classes teaching about positive classroom environments and gave the girls the opportunity to express views they might not articulate about themselves.

The counselors were also enlisted to ensure that the potential risks of the research were minimized. They were pivotal to accessing students who would be in the focus group interviews and critical in providing on going support should the interviews bring up issues within their friendship groups. To my knowledge this was not the case but the setting up of these safeguards was a critical component within the ethical requirements of the project.

One of the requirements before the focus group interviews was explaining that confidentiality extended to all students in the interviews – and also outside of the interview. At the beginning of the focus group interviews I encouraged the participants to write down the names of two people they trusted to talk to if this research brought up anything they were uncomfortable about. The two counselors where also aware of this and were a point of contact for the girls should any issues arise. I had used this approach previously in health education teaching when dealing with topics that could potentially cause stress to students such as abuse and dealing with change loss and grief, to good effect and it was a tried method with Health Educators in New Zealand in in-service and pre service teaching.

Within the interview situation – providing a safe environment in which to discuss was also critical. The use of the DVD to defuse and deflect

from potentially harmful self disclosures was a crucial tool in the focus group interviews. Judging when to "move on" from particular conversations was an important feature of my role as the facilitator of the interviews and when to probe deeper without making the participant uncomfortable was a skill that I had honed as a classroom teacher.

The "wrapping up" of the focus group interview was also a significant moment in the interview process. In the interview guide prior to conducting the focus group interviews I wanted to have the participants leave with a sense of self worth. Therefore – no matter how long the interview went for – it was important to me that I concluded with the participants sharing what they most valued about their friendships with each other.

This proved to be a worthwhile way to draw the focus group interviews to a close:

Tania	*I think. What else do you really value and love about your friendship together*
S	*That we can always laugh*
M	*Yeah we can always laugh together. Yeah like you're lonely, sad or upset. Like these guys they know how to put a smile on my face, they know how to comfort me. They know what to do when I'm sad, they make me laugh and I think that's really important. Like when someone is sad to make them happy is good.*

Data Analysis

As a social constructivist I am acutely aware of my subjectivities in this case study.

> Social constructivists' case studies, findings, and reports are explicitly informed by attention to praxis and reflexivity that understands how ones' own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world, including acts of inquiry. (Patton, 2001, p. 547)

In qualitative case studies triangulation is generally considered as analyzing multiple perspectives in order to clarify meaning, whilst acknowledging that these meanings are not always repeatable (Stake, 2003). In order to understand what girls perceive as bullying and how this influences the ways in which they construct their friendships – I have used the data gathering tools of qualitative questionnaire and focus group interviewing, the interviewers journal – to note the decisions that I made; the thoughts and influences and the ways in which they influenced my decision making at every step of the research process.

The data is the key to the research. I have attempted to analyze it inductively – letting the grouping of themes form my theory. The 'constant comparative' method (Glaser (1978) cited in Cohen et al, 2000) was used to collect data and analyze strategy. Within this method the researcher codes and analyses the data as it is collected, devising concepts and theories and pursuing emerging themes and phenomena as they arise. The constant comparative method is widely recognized and discussed amongst researchers including Taylor and Bogdan (1998) and Cohen, et al (2000). Delamont, (cited in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) suggests as well as seeking out the consistencies that arise during the

coding phase, such as the themes and patterns, the researcher should also be looking for contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities. Then she suggests that you can move forward to 'interrogate' the data and theorize.

Data will be analyzed inductively. Due to my experiences as a teacher and also as an adolescent girl, I will be embarking on the focus group interviews with some idea of the ways in which girls' dynamics influence the ways in which they bully. However in being aware of my own subjectivities I am aware of the need to be reflexive and to 'hear' the 'voices' of the girls I am interviewing. Taylor and Bogdan (in Bogdan & Biklen 1998), describe inductive analysis is when researchers:

> do not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses they hold before entering the study; rather the abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together (Bogden & Biklen, 1998, p. 6)

Chapter 4

Data and findings

Friendship

The definitions for "Friendship" for this thesis are taken from both the qualitative questionnaire that was administered to the year 7 and 8 age group female students at Summer High School and from the focus group interviews conducted with the students. In the questionnaire I asked respondents to reply to questions about what a friendship means to them, to explain what they understood were the reasons why people were popular and mean, whether they had experienced bullying (either as the victims or the perpetrator. I also asked the girls if they could tell me the difference between being mean and bullying. The respondents gave their age and nationality and could choose whether or not to give me their names.

Meaning of Friendship:

The meaning of friendship was constructed largely from annotating the responses to the question "What does friendship mean to you?" in the qualitative questionnaire. Many of the responses were similar in that the values of love, caring, trust and honesty were repeated. From this the meaning of friendship that I refer to in this research is: ***Friendship is a relationship between two or more people which involves love, honesty, trust, fun and the sharing of similar interests***.

In the next section I explore the importance of friendship to the girls in this study. I will then describe how girls from Summer High School form their friendships. Finally I will look at how girls in this study maintain their friendships, with particular emphasis on the importance of talk.

"Friendship for me, kinda [sic] means family. It's a relationship with the people you love and care for. It also means, for me, being with people you [who?] like the same things you like."

Friendship is considered by these girls to be a critical part of their adolescent and pre adolescent lives. Days were spent with friends in class, talking to friends out of class and conversing with girl friends on the phone. The questionnaire elicited statements from the girls as to what they valued in their friendships. Many of the respondents discussed trust and confidentiality with one girl stating that it was:

"Important: They keep their word, and that they really are your friends."

Trust and confidentiality were to become key indicators in the maintenance of friendships once they were established. Being committed as a friend – being there when a friend needed your help, was also something that was highly valued in friendships. These indicators will be explained later in this section.

Friendship to these girls was a noticeable act of togetherness, being alone was not something that the girls wanted to be and mentioned a number of times. Even when they were talking about girls who were more

popular than they were, the girls recognized that not wanting to be alone was one of the reasons why people chose to have friends.

"When they're alone, they're really nice to you because they don't like being alone –
they always want to be with someone and so they're really nice to you and stick by you and they're like "can you wait for me" and stuff."

Being friends with other girls demonstrates why the girls were friends at all – which is essentially to alleviate loneliness. Friends assist them with their social development, provided companionship and give them a sense of self worth and belonging. Friends were considered to be important in forming emerging identities of the girls in this study.

Establishing Friendships:

"Trust, caring, understanding, love, fun, smiles, laughing and all those [sic] other good stuff."

All of the girls that were interviewed in the focus group interviews discussed the importance of friendship. The key themes that emerged were the need for trust, caring, fun, understanding, and being confidential and reliable. For many of the girls the transient nature of being at an international school meant that friendships generally were "new" friendships (the longest of those interviewed dating back to grade one) and many of the girls had experienced changes of schools, changes of country and therefore changes in friendships.

Many of the girls I interviewed found it relatively simple to recall how they met their friends and how long they had known them for. Due to the transient nature of Summer High School many friendships started in an arbitrary fashion because they sat next to them in lessons or had attended the same pre-school camp.

Proximity

Proximity seems to be a key factor in making friends at school, with girls often finding themselves in classes with people that they don't know. Jemma and Renee met and established a friendship based upon proximity, being in the same classes. Daily contact followed by traveling together on the same train home was critical to them becoming friends.

"Last year we knew each other and this year we became more friends and we started going home together."

With Emily's group of friends, the girls were able to describe in intimate detail their beginnings as friends. Some of the girls had been friendly since first grade and had been at the same preschool camp. Others who joined them formed the nucleus of the group that was considered to be "popular" within their grade at Summer High School. The prior acquaintance of two girls in the core group of friends triggered a relationship or friendship once the girls found themselves in the same classes, albeit tumultuous as Melody described the relationship she had with Niamh to be inauspicious, *"I hated her guts".*

Initially it is the school organization that throws these girls together, being in the same class and going to the same pre-school camp together.

This organization seems to be a critical factor for this group of girls, as is the importance of being in the same class in defining their identity. The girls also talk about some of the key indicators of their friendship, which I will look at in maintaining friendships, such as hanging out together and talking to each other in the halls.

Friends by association

Meeting friends was not only by proximity but also through other friends. The girls in all of the focus groups had experiences of making friends through other friends or by association. In this case Melody considered that they weren't "best" friends with these girls but they became friends through knowing other friends, so were considered a part of the friendship groups.

M	*And aahh, Jo the person that was going to come here, she was mostly my best friend with Alice. She moved and I wasn't really friends with them*
Tania	*Yeah*
E	*And then we became friends in 5ᵗʰ grade*

However, these friends by association were not without their complexities as Delia stated;

 "I'm fine with meeting new people but like when I don't get along with them, I don't want them."

Delia also clearly challenged the idea that all friends will be friends because they are in the same class or by associating within the friendship group:

"Like a <u>normal</u> class I have like <u>normal</u> friends, like I don't have any of my <u>close</u> friends in them".

Clearly she perceives there is a difference between those friends she has in classes she attends and her 'close' friends – those with whom she shares interests, experiences and trusts. Close friends are those which she shares confidences with.

Proximity and being associated with other friends does not automatically make for the establishment of a friendship with another girl. The girls in this study mentioned that other factors come into play for example, having shared interests, such as music, social status (which will be discussed more within the Popularity section) and girl talk – which forms the basis of all of the friendship groups' social activities.

<u>Similarities and differences in girls' friendships</u>
"I don't know why we're so random; we're like the 'leftovers'"
As well as the random or arbitrary reasons for making friends, such as sitting next someone in lessons or traveling together on the train, friendship choices for these girls are also based upon a) ethnicity, b) shared interests, c) social status, and d) appearance. The need for the girls to identify themselves as the 'same' or 'similar' and also their differences stood out in this study. When I asked the groups of girls why they were friends with their particular group, two of them mentioned examples related to social status (being able to move in the so called "rich" group), boyfriends and talking about similar things.

The girls in one focus group interview identified their 'sameness' in terms of their ethnicity. They identified as being of Japanese origin. While two of the girls mentioned that they were Japanese American, they had lived most of their lives within Japan and not the United States. Interestingly, while they identified strongly as being Japanese American, they did not identify with the other predominantly Japanese girls group, called "Yumi's group," who were perceived as bring rich and pretty and too exclusive to join.

Other girls identified their similarities in different ways. They mentioned that they shared a similar sense of humor and fun and were able to identify when someone in their group needed extra emotional support. The shared sense of humor combined with girl talk– talk about a range of subjects (including boys and gossiping about other groups) was common to all participants in the focus groups.

Unusually, one group of students chose a particularly interesting aspect to describe the similarities within their friendship, in that they considered themselves to be "mean girls".

Student1	*Yeah, we're not bullies – we're mean.*
Student2	*Yeah, like we kind of consider ourselves mean girls.*
Student3	*Mean? Mean? (seeking clarification from others) laughing*
Student2	*Yeah – we are.*
	(Talking over the top of each other).
Tania	*Why do you consider yourselves the mean girls?*
Student2	*We're pretty…..*
Student3	*Like we don't. I glare*

	Like I don't say bad stuff, I just glare
Student1	*She has the meanest look*
Tania	*Yeah*
Student2	*…and she's so cute – she's just like quiet – but she disses*
Student1	*We're more…we're the stronger ones who – like she said"*
Student2	*We're brave.*
Student	*We're brave.*

However it seemed to me that meanness was in fact, smoke and mirrors to hide the real closeness and camaraderie of the group. The girls were very supportive of the strengths of each of their group members, mentioning that they each had skills and attributes that the others admired in their friends and accentuating that these differences complemented their friendships. They described themselves as being formidable, a perception that at they were acutely aware of and yet an image that they did nothing to dispel. The status of "mean girls" was powerful and that if you didn't have the power by being popular being mean would certainly earn you attention.

Student 3	*I'm sure we seem like a bunch of bitches... from the outside but once you get to know us*
Student 1	*Like when the four of us are walking down the hallway they seem so mean. Like when I look in the mirror …*
Student 3	*Like if I were other people I'd be scared too*
Student 1	*Like when were pissed off and we're involved in the press room and we're walking by the hall wearing high heels and we look a mile away and just pass without saying anything of course you're gonna get weird …*
Student 4	*Lots of time the girls don't like us too, but like now we're ok*

Social status was an interesting aspect of two of the groups' friendships. This was measured in terms of popularity, the perceptions of beauty (appearance) and also whether or not they we seem to be dating popular boys.

Participants in one focus group mentioned that they were "pretty" and that was seen as essential to the composition of their friendship group. "We're kind of preppie-ish (*lots of giggling from the students*)" was a comment from the same group. Being "preppie" is a term that is well known amongst North American students and refers to a look that is typical of students who have attended private high schools.

<u>Maintaining Friendships:</u>

"*Slumber parties, movies, discussing hotties, eating like heck till you can't move, gossip*"

The ways the girls in these focus group interviews maintained their friendships was of interest to me. In all group interviews and within the qualitative questionnaire, the themes of confidentiality and trust, reliability, commitment, and reciprocity emerged as key indicators in girls' friendships. Throughout their daily encounters and activities the girls suggested that these indictors were valued and girl talk was the link.

The activities that girls engaged in regularly together brought about closeness through shared experiences and helped in strengthening and maintaining their friendships. How girls maintained their friendships was

through being together or "hanging out"; being involved in shared interests such as playing musical instruments; sleepovers, having a laugh and talking. Girl talk was considered the glue that bound friends together and conversely was the aspect that could fracture friendships and cause disruptions to relationships within groups.

Activities girls do to maintain friendships

"Hanging out" – bought about togetherness amongst the girls. They maintained daily contact through shared classes as we have seen above and also shared interests.

"Talk…chat…laugh together… (at least that what we do…)"

Jemma, Renee and Mary were musical. At the end of the interview they discussed practicing music together and shared the exciting news that they were going to be traveling to another Asian country as a part of a music exchange. All shared a common bond of music and had the added bonus of their musical abilities providing them with the opportunity to travel.

Other girls in the focus groups mentioned that they spend time together shopping or eating at McDonalds. Pirikora (taking photos in photo booths) was also an activity that some of the girls enjoyed together. Taking photos of your friends and sticking them on your cell phone was a visual way of signaling to others that these girls were your friends.

Having a laugh together was for one group, a sign of their intimacy and closeness. Shared laugher was something I noted throughout the

interview process and it was not only laughing at something the group found funny but also a way of maintaining exclusiveness. The friends knew what was funny as they had "in" jokes which had originated from shared experiences. In some cases – this could be seen as a way to exclude non group members – but in this context the girls described having a laugh as a critical element to their friendship. Melody describes this when she discusses what she values in her friendships:

M	*Yeah we can always laugh together. Yeah like you're lonely, sad or upset. Like these guys they know how to put a smile on my face, they know how to comfort me. They know what to do when I'm sad, they make me laugh and I think that's really important. Like when someone is sad to make them happy is good.*
E	*And ummm I really like we have the biggest fights and it's the end of the world and then 5 minute later its like wondering why were we mad .. you know*

Having fun together was a central feature of the friendships between all the girls. Enjoying a laugh was an indicator of the closeness the group of girls was or how close they were to a particular friend.

Also central to girls' relationships alongside the activities they share together (shopping, going to the movies, eating out) are other interactions that the girls themselves describe as "talk". There were three forms of "talk" that I identified amongst the groups of girls that I interviewed; dissing or ditching (being uncomplimentary about other girls or boys); ordinary talk and confiding talk. Talk was central to each of these themes.

<u>Confidentiality and Trust</u>

"I like it when my friends tell me stuff, which shows they trust me.
Also I love hugs especially when I'm feeling down."

As adolescents, the girls in this study were very concerned with trust and confidentiality. *"Trust to me is the most important thing in friendship. With no trust to a friend it's like ruining a friendship."* Central to all of the girls involved in the focus group interviews was confidentiality and trust. Many of the girls had experienced situations where trust had been broken or betrayed. The level of the secret or trust that was exposed determined the fallout that would occur within the friendships.

Melody	*Everyone feels bad, like secrets, like you did something bad or what's confidential between you and that person, yah…it makes you hurt. But like if it's something funny and you don't really care that everyone knows that kinda thing………..*

The entrusting of a secret was something that made girls feel valued and wanted. It was also a commodity that could be traded for self promotion or advancing up the social ladder as we will see in the "popularity" section. Being entrusted with a secret meant a deeper level of intimacy between the friends, an emotional investment in the friendship.

"When a friend tells you a secret that means that they trust you and are
not afraid of telling a secret."

Being trusted and being seen to be confidential was immensely important for the girls in this study. The punishments for betraying secrets were in most cases harsh and could lead to rejection by their peers and the smearing of their reputation.

<u>Reliability and Commitment</u>

The reliability of friends was also considered crucial by the girls involved in this study. They often talked about being there for each other and making each other laugh or feel better.

"When they laugh at my stupidest [sic] jokes, when they stand up for me, when they lend me their shoulder to cry upon, when they are always there for me."

The girls discussed that they all seemed to understand the trials that adolescent girls went through and this emotional understanding bonded them even more closely. In two focus groups the girls spoke about this being particularly significant, as they were beginning to become more involved with boys. Sharon explained why girls were more reliable and necessary than boys. She had previously explained that she has had a tumultuous relationship with the girls in her peer group and had fought with them, however, there came a point in her life where Sharon realized – she needed "girl" friends.

Sharon	*And then after a while I thought this is not what I want cos I want to be friends with everyone and I , you need to be friends with girls in your life cos they're like the only ones that can help you. Guys can't really help you out when you have your period or stuff you know. So then I decided maybe I should apologize and ask for a 2nd chance cos then in the beginning, ending of 6th grade beginning of 7th grade I tried to change who I was and I became friends with girls*

Sharon was still adjusting to this new dynamic of having female friends, however saw value in having girl friends to discuss issues that only girls experienced, such as menstruation.

Another important facet of female adolescent friendships is commitment to the friendship. True friends, the girls suggested, were people that you can rely on to be there when you need them. One respondent to the questionnaire wrote that friendship is *"When your friend always has ur bak [sic]."* "Having your back" is a form of protection towards friends in the friendship group – a promise that they will stand by you. Michelle told me that her friendship group were close and looked out for each other, even though they would diss each other in the interviews.

Student 3	*We're closer than we seem. We seem like we're not really that close*
Student 1	*Yeah I still like, I love them just as much and Stephanie too. I mean we like might have had our problems in the beginning but then just getting over those problems makes us closer.*

The Role of Talk

So what do teenage girls spend all their time talking about? One respondent to the qualitative questionnaire summed it up:

"Hang out, movies, chat (about boys, celebs fashion), gossip, party, music, shopping."

Talk was considered central to the friendships that the girls maintained. There were three aspects of talk that the girls used; gossip; ordinary talk; and sharing secret/or confiding talk.

Gossip

Many of the girls I talked to in the focus group interviews mentioned "talking" as a major part of their day to day interactions. Clearly they enjoyed talking about fashion, shopping, who was popular and whose reputations were at risk at school.

Gossip was seen as both good and bad. Many girls mentioned that gossiping was "exciting" and a way of telling your friends about something new:

Juliet	*Because gossiping can be new – something that's exciting. And then dissing, that's like, um that's just like ..looking for something that's wrong and then telling people*

Talking and gossiping was a part of the bonding that friends did and many of the girls used electronic means to spread the news.

Student2	*When I find out something new, well the first thing I do is mail my friends, you know…*
Student2	*Like when I'm not with them then I mail them in class or something and then I say, guess what, there's this and that*

Dissing or ditching was a pastime that most of the girls in the focus group admitted that they had either been engaged in or the recipient of.

"Girls always like to gossip, and talk about interesting things. Girls like to talk about other girls."

Dissing is not limited to verbal interactions but can also be electronic, through *My Space, Bebo* and also through text messaging. Many of the participants mentioned that dissing is "being mean" and this will be covered later in this chapter.

Talking about other people was commonplace for this particular group. Gossip is an accepted part of the daily interactions between groups of friends and about other groups, it's neither perceived to be "bad" or unusual. However the girls realize that gossiping has negative implications if you are the subject of it.

Student2	*Well the funny thing is like most of the gossip starts with those groups and gossip starts like so fast…*
Student3	*You sitting at your table and you tell your group something and like they all go and tell other people….*
Student1	*Everybody knows that there's always one person that has a real big mouth and that will tell the whole entire school … its like one in each group*

<u>Ordinary talk.</u>

Ordinary talk centered on sharing past adventures or stories. One group discussed extensively experiences that they had shared over a slumber party. The over talking was an interesting dynamic to watch. I noted at the time that it seemed that each of the girls were clamoring over each other to give their interpretation of the saga in order to get to the greater consensus of what happened that night at the party.

Girls in two focus groups who were perceived by their peers as being more popular (and who perceived themselves as being popular) also derived a lot of enjoyment out of talking about boys. This seemed to reinforce the closeness of the group, being able to talk openly and frankly about those they would date; those they wouldn't and the current "hot" or popular boys to go out with. The danger of this was that this talk was also confiding or secret talk and meant that the person who shared their views, was vulnerable to having her secrets exposed in a moment of maliciousness.

<u>Sharing secrets</u>

"You would only tell people that you trust. Don't go around telling everybody and then expect them to trust…I mean expect them not tell."

While sharing experiences and talking together about experiences and plans was considered "ordinary talk", my study demonstrated that there was a deeper level of talk that occurred that was more intensely personal and so demanded a deeper level of trust, confidence and loyalty amongst the friends.

If confidences were to be shared then it was crucial to the girls that secrecy was kept.

Student1	*Okay, we have some kind of rules like if we're all at a love thing – we say, "Whatever we talk about stays in this room – no one repeats it" and then everyone says it again – it stays there.*
Student2	*It's like her house, she has the biggest house – but like we just talk there and share our secrets and who we like - what guys……*

The type of confiding talk for these girls centered upon boys that they liked, and who they fantasized about dating. In both the focus group interviews and qualitative questionnaire the emphasis was on trust.

"When a friend tells you a secret. That means that they trust you and are not afraid of telling a secret. And when we have fun." (Respondent from the qualitative interview)

The betraying of these secrets often led to disruptions in the friendships. Talking behind your back – letting friends down by sharing confidences was something that many girls mentioned as disrupting or upsetting friendships. *"Dissing, ditching, telling lies and telling all your secrets to others"* was considered the very worst thing a friend could do and will be discussed in a latter part of this chapter.

Girls' friendships according to the girls in this study were critical to their lives. There was a high emotional investment in friendships and many of the girls believed that commitment, reliability, trust, love and reciprocity were important elements. Their friendships were bound together through "talk" and the sharing of confidences.

<u>Reciprocity</u>

In the girl world of Summer High School, reciprocity was a key indicator in the maintenance of friendships. The meaning of friendship to one girl aged 12 referred to *"The relationship between 2 friends. The relationship should include love, trust, fun and everything to be a good friend"*. Implicit in this definition was that the sharing of love, trust and fun was mutual and that each friend would reciprocate the feeling or actions. Michelle told me in focus group 3 that she felt that she learnt how to behave or act a girl

from her friends. If she was struggling with a relationship, whether it was with a teacher or boyfriend or parents, she said that her friends would be there for her.

Student 1	*I can't keep it in, I'll like … teacher and stuff I'll say like I'm fine but then when I'm really struggling I'll tell my closest friends or someone I think can actually …*
Student 2	*Help*
Student 1	*… understand and they help me out*

In turn, Michelle would be expected to assist her close friends who were in need. It was an unmentioned rule according to one respondent in the questionnaire:

"Friendship is something not tangible; you have it and yet you feel obliged to do things because of it."

The sharing or trading of secrets amongst friends was something that was also seen as important. Trading secrets was essential to the ebb and flow of maintaining friends within these groups. The difference was that one had to be careful, prudent and sometimes calculating when it came to secrets and talk. One respondent (Dalia) mentioned that girls were *"calculative"* in the ways they interacted with each other. The glue that bound these adolescent friends together was "girl talk". Girl talk is the central facet to girls' interactions and maintaining friendships. It was also fraught with danger.

Popularity

The meaning of popularity was derived from the questionnaire in response to the question "How does a girl become popular?" A common response was that if a girl was "known" or recognized amongst her peers, both girls and boys, and was "likeable" or sought after as a friend then she was considered popular. For the purposes of this research, popularity is defined as being "recognized amongst peers and sought after as a friend."

"Everybody wants to be popular, you know….everyone wants to be noticed, like, they want to be known."

The focus groups I conducted for this research seemed to represent the continuum of "popularity" within their grade at school. One group was considered popular by their peers and perceived themselves to be popular also. Another group felt that they were the *"leftovers"* from the popular group – but still maintained a presence and a certain popularity and social status within the grade. The final group consisted of girls who all identified as Japanese American and were the most ambivalent to the concept of popularity, simply stating;

Renee	*We don't try and be that popular…*
Juliet	*We don't really care enough about what other people think*

There are many well traveled routes to popularity. The respondents in the qualitative questionnaire and also the participants in the focus group interviews mentioned five key indicators of popularity:

1. Social Status (including nice clothes/fashionable)

2. Considered to be pretty or "hot"

3. High status (popular) boyfriend

4. Being nice/mean/ or powerful – or a combination of all

5. Reputation

In this section I am going to examine these factors in relation to establishing popularity and how girls manage popularity.

<u>Social Status</u>

"I don't want to be super popular but I don't wanna be someone who's looked down on"

Being popular in Summer High School depended upon a number of factors. Social status seemed to be one of the factors that the girls considered elevated one to a popular position. A number of the students noted that being "rich" was one way of being granted entry into higher popularity status. Others commented that alongside financial status, having "connections" was also a factor that ensured that you had the "inside running" in the race to being popular.

Student 1 & 3	*Yeah so the whole popular girl is like 8th Grade – they're all really mean. They're all mean and they always have to look…and they're always rich. And* **they do scare people and they're scared of you***…they're like…they're not going to do what they don't want…you know.* *But if you like put it to 7th Grade and 1st….no 6th Grade there is. 7th Grade it's just hard because everybody is constantly on the same*

	level, I mean like no one's super super rich or no one is super super mean…we're all just like the same.

The students in this exchange highlight the different dichotomies operating within popularity. In one instance – you are popular if you are "perfect" and "people look up to you", but on the other hand – to maintain the position of being popular – a girl must be mean. Interestingly both of the girls responding above mention that the popular girls are "rich" and that in their grade and the grade lower – no one is "super, super rich" and that creates issues as there is no obvious hierarchy. Being "rich" or having wealth was seen as the social measure of success. If you were wealthy then you had power and connections. Alongside this wealth meant that you could buy fashionable clothing and makeup and other items that these girls think make you more desirable to boys. *"And they do scare people and they're scared of you…they're like…they're not going to do what they don't want…you know".*

It is noteworthy to mention in this section, there is an underlying sense that those who have popularity – have the power and are in a position to wield that over others. Jemma in focus group 3 brings this up when she is talking about Yumi – a powerful and popular girl in her grade. Jemma was talking about a situation at basketball practice where members of Yumi's group had made fun of the way the girls were running. However – tellingly, the girls in Jemma's group did not challenge the behavior of the more popular girls. Instead they opted to "just kind of nodded" in agreement, because challenging that assertion would have lead to Jemma and her friends – being subjected to "dissing' or ridicule. "Dissing" is considered as a negative evaluation of a person who is usually present.

Renee	*Popular because they know people.*
Jemma	*Like Yumi she's like….and I was like talking to this girl in my drama group and she said that everyone has to be nice to Yumi because she has these huge parties…like a really big parties and then if you're not nice to her, she won't invite you.*
Tania	*Right.*
Jemma	*And also she has two older sisters who are in high school and then they're popular so she has a lot of like connections.*
Tania	*Yeah.*
Jemma	*And her dad is really well know - they're pretty rich*

Yumi was considered by all of the girls in the focus groups to be powerful in the school setting. She was rich; powerful because of her connections, namely her older sisters who were in high school and had the ability to make others lives miserable. More than anything the girls in Jemma's clique were aware of Yumi's social status and her power, and in many ways were fearful of the implications for them if they crossed her. In all of the interactions with Yumi and her clique, Jemma and her friends trod the path of least resistance. Jemma and her group took the advice of one of Yumi's associates to be nice to Yumi because "she has huge parties and invites many people", subtly implying the wide reach of her popularity. They chose not to confront other girls when they were mean about their running style and to "fly beneath the radar". Jemma and her friends were acutely aware that to stand up for the girl who was being "dissed" and confront Yumi would leave them socially isolated now and when they moved to high school as "people won't like us."

<u>Being hot – perceptions of beauty and popularity</u>

"When she has a lot of friends and when she is beautiful and liked by the other famous or popular girls and boys."

Physical attractiveness, or being hot, was considered to be a critical part of being popular. Being "hot" meant that you had status not only amongst your peer group but also with the popular boys, who were also considered "hot" and had an important role in achieving social success. In many cases – being considered "hot" or "cute" meant that a girl was more superior than those who weren't considered equally attractive. The students in one focus group emphasized that as their physical attractiveness to boys increased so did their status within their peer group. While you had to have "the looks", the students never explicitly detailed what those looks were. The more attractive she was, the more likely she would be selected as a friend. One thing was clear, that if a girl was considered unattractive, she were not going to be high on the popularity hit parade.

| Student 3 | *Yeah you can be like you have to have the looks, you have to have the hotness and …* |
| Student 4 | *You can't be ugly and popular and that's why people put on makeup and do stuff with their hair* |

"Hotness" was the ticket: the key factor in being popular and dating the good looking boys. If you were attractive then you were considered "super popular" with the ultimate aim to "hang out with the hot guys."

Being hot was not without its disadvantages – and often to combat the dominance of the "hot" girls over those who were not so hot, used meanness to try and curtail the superiority of the popular girls.

Student 2	*And also because I was kinda, when I was younger I was … cute.. sorry I don't wanna be ..self…uuuhhhh*
Student 3	*Yeah you were cute*
Student 2	*Yeah I was cute so I had lots of guys and they didn't like that*
Student 1	*You weren't that modest about it*
Student 2	*Yeah and I was really mean and then I went out with … a girl liked this guy and I didn't know and I went out with him and then she got mad and then all of the girls in my grade hated me and then all the guys liked me and I was fine with that, I'd just hang out with guys*

Student 2 saw herself as attractive and superior to the girls in her peer group. Her experiences throughout her high schooling year demonstrated that she knew that other girls responded negatively to her attractiveness to boys and felt threatened and was able to label it for what it was – jealousy.

High Status Boyfriend

Dating and having a boyfriend was another feature of adolescence for these girls. Having a high status boyfriend was associated with popularity. Being attracted to boys was the source of much talk, mirth and anxiety during the interviews. The conversations (which the girls themselves declared "were endless") were discussed, and retold numerous times during their social times or girl talk times together.

Student 1	*Rachel's boyfriend is popular (Lots of laughing)*
Student2	*Rachel's boyfriend….*
Student1	*Her boyfriend is one of the popular boy groups in 8th Grade.*
Tania	*So you automatically become popular for that*
	The girls want to hang out with you. (Lots more laughing and giggling)

Despite Rachel's popularity with the "popular girls", she maintained her status with her own group of friends. Her friends also needed her, as they automatically became a little more credible and popular by association due largely to Rachel and her boyfriend's popularity. New friends from the most popular group also wanted to be friends with Rachel and on occasion she took up their offers to "hang out" which was mutually beneficial in that both participants were highly visible and increased their social currency i.e., popularity. For the most part however her loyalties lay with her immediate friends as according to Rachel, they were her "true friends".

Being Nice and being Mean – the paradox of Popularity
"There's a popular nice girl, but she's not as popular as a popular mean girl"

Being "nice" was an ideal that many of the girls involved in this research saw as a factor in both their friendships and popularity. "Nice" behavior or people who were nice, had high expectations placed upon them that they would be "nice to everyone", "a friend to all" and had the ability to "cheer everyone up". Being "caring" and "looking out" for another person has been mentioned as why a girl becomes popular. It seemed to

give credence to the social construct of girls as being "nice and nurturing". Having good grades and studying was also an attribute of the "nice" popular girl.

Nice popular girls were considered to be safe. You could approach them, talk with them and they in turn would be nice to you.

Student 3	*So like you have to have that and then if you're nice you can be called popular but people will be really nice to you and they won't be as scared of you cos they think 'oh she's nice I'm not gonna be scared of her and I can talk to her'*

Being nice not only extended to a part of the social construction of girls that those involved in the study highlighted but also to the interpersonal behaviors that characterized their peers and their actions. The kingmakers or the queen-makers as the case may be, were the mean popular girls, because they were powerful, had the ear of the mass followers who were willing to spread gossip in order to maintain their popularity by association, and were feared. Their very power came from their status of being mean and popular and they commanded respect for the damage they could inflict if you crossed them.

Throughout the questionnaires and focus group interviews it seemed that popularity hinged upon power and although a girl may have initially been "nice" and popular, to maintain that power she had to be mean. One respondent mentioned that popular girls were a specific type of person.

"There are 2 types; 1: Where you are nice to everyone and they like you, or 2: when everyone is scared of you and just respects you or is too scared to be disrespectful."

This definition of the two types of popular girls was detailed more specifically in one focus group interview.

Student 3	*There's a popular **nice** girl but she's not as popular as a popular mean girl*
Student 2	*Who*
Student 3	*No I'm just saying that I think that*
Student 3	*They're not scared of the popular nice girls right. They're really nice*
Student 3	*So people don't look up to her as much and they're not scared*
Student 1	*(loud noise) oh my gosh*
Tania	*So if you're nice you don't really get further than when you're um mean or ..*
Student 3	*If you're mean you're hated too*
Student 2	*Yeah*

One such exchange illustrated the interconnectedness of the indicators of popularity in the words of the participants themselves; that, in order to be popular, you must fit the predetermined perception of what beauty is, *"you can't be ugly and popular".* You can indeed be popular and nice and people can talk to you but at the end of the day a popular mean girl is the one who most people will look up to and fear. Being popular allows you to hang out with the popular boys which again increases your popular street credibility; *"If your super popular then….then you get to hang out with the hot guys….yeah, hang out with the hot guys."* Being associated with the popular

girls and the hot guys – increased the visibility of the girls around them, thus allowing them to bask in the light of someone else's popularity.

The most popular people were also identified as the most hated according to the focus groups. It is a measure of one group's perceived popularity that they mention that they are hated too for being popular or a threat to the popularity of the "super popular" people. The measure of their success and their own popularity was that they too were hated, *"Yeah, but we're hated by people who count."*

Reputation

"These days being popular usually means that you are either pretty or you have done something "bad" to get there."

Rebellion was considered by some of the girls in the focus groups and qualitative questionnaires, as a way of becoming popular and a way to distinguish you from the rest of the group. Rebels were associated with "reputations," and having a "bad" reputation was good for your status and enhanced your popularity. Being bad was often mentioned as challenging the school authorities in such a way that other students would admire your chutzpah and spirit. *"Hating school"* and wanting to *"burn the school down"* was seen as showing that you were courageous and unafraid to take on the school system. "It's cool to be the bad guys laughing" (presumably in the faces of the school administrators and teachers) demonstrated that rebels were admired amongst the culture of this particular school. Students mentioned that the more rebellious you were, the more popular you became.

Student2	*…and one thing that kind of prevents[being popular] you is like having a reputation.*
Student1	*Like a lot of people have like a reputation of being like you know like a "class clown" or something and then usually that's what people think of you forever unless you make a huge change and like if you have a really bad reputation like being like a slut or something, then that's what your reputation is going to be and everybody is going to feel that way and it's like really hard to shake off reputations.*

A second aspect to reputation was at once negative and positive. *"The 8th grade girls that do mostly bad stuff"* were mentioned as being popular. *"Bad stuff"* was never directly discussed but it was clear from the ensuing talk around those who had reputations, that those who were involved in the *"bad stuff"* had *"slutty reputations".* Reputations had a habit of following you around, and once forged – it was difficult to change the perceptions of others around you.

Managing Popularity

Popularity, once acquired, was a status that was fluid if it wasn't maintained and fed. Being popular required that a girl had to be at once visible and also enlist the support of others to enable her to maintain her popularity and fend off those who were vying to usurp her popular position. Maintaining and managing one's popularity was a consuming ideal. There was the notion that you had to be fashionable and that when other girls copy your fashion then it proved that you had reached the pinnacle of social success.

Popular girls were the most visible in the school; they were the girls that everyone knew by name as was the case with Yumi and Rachel. Being visible meant engaging with activities and people who were also considered popular and to a certain extent, distancing yourself from those who were considered less popular; "*Like I've met people that I really do like but depends on who they are and stuff…."*

For those less popular girls wanting to follow the popular girls' fashion (thereby reinforcing their power and influence) was a double-edged sword. Being seen to be copying was not cool, but not being at the forefront of fashion, was also not cool.

Student1	*It's not like if a popular girl in my group started having holes in her shirt – it doesn't mean that everyone would*
Student2	*We'd be too scared to do that. If somebody caught me, they'd be like "ewww why are you copying".*

Popularity was synonymous with power and influence over other girls in the peer group. Yumi's group who have been mentioned above, were at once popular and powerful because of Yumi's high status amongst both girls and boys of her grade and her ability to throw "huge parties" and invite a large number of people to those parties. Popular people hung out with other popular people at McDonalds and would fend off potential competition by using their not so secret weapon – dissing and rumors spreading negative information.

Yumi's group managed their popularity by being exclusive. When asked to describe the types of groupings within their school, Jemma and her friends talked about Yumi being popular.

Jemma	*….they all speak Japanese …mmm…we call them the Yumi group cos Yumi is the leader , everyone calls them the Yumi group*
Tania	*Oh, okay.*
Jemma	*…that only has six girls in it.*
Renee	*…and they never let anyone in.*
Jemma	*…and I think they are all really rich and they're kind of pretty.*

Maintaining a "tight" and exclusive group was Yumi's way of maintaining power. Although others wanted to be Yumi's friends, it was a vigorously guarded friendship both lending to their popularity, as others wanted to be involved in and associated with a tight, exclusive and powerful group of girls.

Being popular and nice was often a double-edged sword for girls. Girls in the research often commented that when someone was popular they often started to be "mean" to others in order to ensure that ongoing popularity. "Power" and "control" was used frequently to describe how girls maintain their popularity.

"I think girls are popular because they are somewhat mean. If you are kind or nice, other girls can use you for them to become popular."

This presented popular girls with a distressing paradox, being popular and nice because you were nice to everyone, and hanging out with

people who were not going to enhance your popularity and could indeed be detrimental to your popularity.

Student2	*I actually really don't like the reputation thing. I wish that like we didn't have to by reputations like to hang out with somebody will ruin your reputation. Like I've met people that I really do like but depends on who they are and stuff, it's just they want to be who they are, you know.*
Tania	*Yeah.*
Student2	*It would affect my reputation because you know, if they have a bad reputation.*

The visibility of the popular girls meant that often they were the subject of talk and gossip and were also involved in using gossip and confiding talk to maintain their status. Talk, gossip, rumor and dissing were referred to by girls in both the questionnaires and focus groups as ways in which girls maintain power and therefore popularity. Many of the girls who weren't considered the most popular were fearful of those who had the power as they had the ability to make life difficult at school by their words. Having the popularity and the power did not as many of the girls declared *"mean that you can be mean to lower people than you."* Evident in this - is that the girls themselves are acutely aware of the social stratum operating in the relationships they have with their peers, particularly those who are perceived as being popular.

"They're always talking behind each others backs" was commonplace when talking about girls and popularity. Talk, particularly negative talk, was the

weapon that was used by adolescent girls in this study to both evaluate their popularity and keep the competition at arms length.

The Mean Girl

The next section will look at the disruptions to friendships and popularity in light of the data gathered and discusses the role that talk plays as a feature of girls' maneuverings and maintaining their own status within their peer group.

When describing popularity and friendships, the girls often referred to people being mean to them. Meanness was often described as an attack on status and an abuse of power. *"Being mean is to try and destroy another girl's position"* one respondent answered. Another talked about payback – and that *"being mean is doing it for a reason (to get back at)"* someone. Friendship, popularity and status are, as we have seen, highly contested in this environment, and the competition to be a "friend" or to be popular gave rise to "the mean girl".

Rebecca	*I don't want to hang out with them because they're so mean…they talk about all you guys behind your back*

Throughout the study, the theme of being mean emerged hand in hand with making friends and aspiring to popularity. Being mean was a term that the girls referred to often but at times found hard to define. They were able to give me examples of how girls are mean, in fact one group when I asked how girls are mean, they laughed and almost exasperatedly declared *"my god…**that's** a long conversation!"* Acts of meanness included

dissing, gossiping and spreading rumors that would damage a reputation. However, it was the reasons around why girls were mean that raised my interest. From the data, being mean was largely described by the girls as acts whose intent or result was to hurt someone's status, reputation or to hurt them emotionally. The factors associated with girls being mean were grouped into the following categories: a) competition, b) jealousy, c) betrayal, d) protection and e) payback.

Competition for friends

Student1	*Or maybe it's because you might want to be better than them. We want that other person not to be friends with them*

Competition was regarded as *"talking behind someone's back"*. Generally the competition looked seemingly one dimensional, based upon perceptions of beauty, *"wanting to be the prettiest"* or being *"the best at something"*. Covertly, and what was seldom directly stated, was that girls were positioning themselves in order to enhance their status as friends and popularity amongst their peer group by being *better* than other girls who were considered threats to their popularity.

One of the avenues to popularity was having a popular boyfriend. I asked one group what the reasons were that girls were mean to each other:

Student4	*To impress guys*
Student1	*God……*
Student	*Yeah……*
Tania	*Is "guy" a big thing at your age as well?*

Student2	*Yeah.*
Student1	*Like not to get guys – but like to get something –* *to beat the other girl and get him.*

As revealing as this comment was, what was more revealing was the open admission of competition. Beating the other girl was more important than the actual end result which was to have a boyfriend. Beating another girl who was competing for the same boy's affections raised the level of your visibility and status amongst your peer group, and immediately enhanced your popularity. Being mean was the avenue taken in order to do this. Talking, gossiping and dissing were the weapon of choice for girls in order to compete with each other.

Student 2	*Like you talk to them and they say like, you're dating a slut…and* *then someone goes and tells you and you're like you said that to me!* *(pointed realistic example)*

The competition for power and popularity was a nearly ubiquitous concern for the girls in my research. The process was almost inextricably linked as friends were at once rivals and supporters in the competition for friendship. Delia was profoundly aware of this competition within her peer group and her role as someone who had gained a certain level of popularity not because of her status but due to her association with Rachel who was popular.

Student 2 and 3	*You're always…yes you have friends that are popular too but* *you're always competing against each other – like a silent war,like* *you never really comfortable because you're um….everybody's*

	competing. It's like your friend is so popular and you're not then other people are always picking her instead of you. Yup. (Giggles).

She likened the competition to war and importantly a *"silent war"*.

Stealth and covert competition against one another was underlined strongly by Delia. It seemed to reinforce the premise that most girls understood that it was not advantageous to outwardly strive to be popular but that it had to be achieved through covert actions, which led to competition. The tension between competition and conflict severely tested this friendship, particularly as most of the girls valued loyalty and trustworthiness amongst their friends. Being seen to be openly competitive was a source of conflict for most girls – and their answer was to enlist the help of others and get someone else to do the dirty work and go about it furtively.

Student 1	*I think it's too hard to tell the person that.* *They have to tell somebody else*

With being openly competitive frowned upon, girls looked to other opportunities to assert themselves and compete with each other. Telling others, spreading rumors and dissing lead to slurs upon reputations and for the girls at the brunt of the slur usually resulted in a loss of status and a decline in popularity.

Jealousy was one of the more common reasons for disruptions to friendships. Jealousy seemed to stem from girls being worried that other girls were perceived to be prettier or more popular than they were and also because a girl would lose her friend to someone else. Jealousy was

directed both at girls within their friendship groups, as to who was popular and how that impacted on their friendships, and also towards other girls in the peer groups who were perceived threats either to popularity or to their friendships. Jealousy was cited by more than one group for being the reason why people were dissing.

Student 3	*They say they're scared of us but usually when people are* **jealous** *of other people they start dissing about them*

Often students said that the jealousy starts with girls competing with each other over who is the prettiest and who is the best. As I mentioned previously, the premise that you have to look "hot" or be perceived as attractive was one of the key avenues to popularity and having a higher status in your peer group. The girls acknowledged that most of these changes occurred around the same time as puberty with the changes impacting upon girls physically but also having a direct bearing on their friendships and status.

Student 1	*People start noticing you*
Student 2	*11 or 12*
Student 1	*When you start caring about how you look then other people start like competing with you*
Tania	*Yeah*
Student 1	*So there's always that competition and you always want to be the prettiest or the best at something*
Student 2	*Yeah*
Student 3	*And the jealousy starts happening a lot more with girls. When you're like 11 or 12 and it goes more and more and more then it*

	will eventually calm down

When physical changes occur the girls felt more vulnerable; and this vulnerability translated to their friendships. While Delia never used the word "jealousy" to describe her insecurity or fear of rejection as Rachel's friend, she used every opportunity available during the interview to paint Rachel in a bad light. Delia used Rachel as an example to demonstrate how popularity influences others at the same time her jealousy and insecurity is evident in what she said.

Delia	*Like if Rachel comes to school dressed in a skuzzy outfit and then we come to school dressed in a skuzzy outfit like…*

The focus group interviews seemed to empower Delia to confront Rachel openly. At one point during the focus group interviews she pointedly asks Rachel to choose between her and the popular girl. *"…the question I would like to say to Rachel is which one do you prefer? Her or me?"* It was interesting that Delia challenged so openly and was one to share that she was hurt – but would never openly admit to being jealous.

Delia	*Like we got really upset like because it seemed to us she preferred going with "popular people", like more popular people than us – so it kind of really hurt and we got mad at her.*

Hurt and betrayal were key factors in friendships being disrupted. Jealousy of another's position or popularity was something that was difficult to openly admit to. Jealousy is a term that the girls used but did not want to attribute to themselves although they were quick to label

others as being jealous. Hurt and betrayal were the outcomes of feeling jealous and vulnerable within a friendship. Betrayal, however, was cited in the questionnaire as the biggest disruption to friendships.

Betrayal

Betrayal was something that was cited as being 'mean'. Many students in the questionnaires cited trust and loyalty as being factors that made them feel valued in friendships. Overwhelmingly the betrayal most mentioned was the telling of secrets. This was the worst thing you could do as a friend. It caused even more hurt if the friend who had shared the secret was close or had done it to move up the popularity "totem pole".

"When they let me down, such as embarrass me or tell a secret. Also if they ignore me sometimes."

Confiding talk amongst girls was one of the most important aspects of their friendships. As mentioned earlier, the girls talked about anything from celebrity gossip, to what was going on with other girls and boys in their peer group, to boys that they would like to date. The sharing or trading of these secrets was a huge dent to loyalty and trust within friendships.

One respondent to the questionnaire talked about why people upset friendships by trading secrets.

"When you pretend that you hate a person when you really don't and diss about them so you can be accepted in another group."

This indicated the **power** and **value** of the secret traders. Trading secrets was used not only to hurt or betray a friend but was also used in order to gain something, in this case acceptance into another group of friends. The secret traders used secrets to their advantage, and having a secret and trading it for acceptance or status within the peer group was useful. The downside to being a secret trader was that they were recognized as people who were not trustworthy.

Melody	*Everybody knows that there's always one person that has a real big mouth and that will tell the whole entire school... its like one in each group*

The trading of secrets was not just limited to the "big mouth"; in fact the girls freely admitted that they too had been the instigators and purveyors of gossip and slander. Melody admitted that *"you can't really help but say something kind of bad about them."*

The consequences of this secret trading were serious. Friendships were disrupted and in many cases ceased. Melody related a story about one of her former friends (Michelle) who happened to now be a member of the popular group in the focus group interviews.

Melody	*I'm talking about how girls are mean, like she's dissing her best friend behind her back because (Very fast and hard to pick up what she's saying…..)* *She's saying she's a slut and everything but so is everybody. You know like* **they're not actually true friends**

Michelle, who is doing the dissing, has become the object of the secret traders. Michelle's betrayal of her friend (who in this case was in Melody's group) had the reverse result to what she had anticipated and instead lead to Michelle's reputation being tarnished. Calling another girl a "slut" and dissing her identified Michelle as not a true friend, someone you could not trust. Her betrayal of her original friends lead to disapproval throughout her peer group, and something that Michelle herself acknowledged, when she stated *"I'm hated around here."*

Power

"Girls have two faces so probably one mean and one nice"

Popularity enabled a girl to feel good about herself. If she felt good she felt confident and was almost certainly assured of the support of friends and other girls who wanted to become popular in association with the popular girl. This popularity was transformed into power. The more popular you were the more influence you had over other girls and their actions and behaviors.

One question in the questionnaire asked if girls could be popular and mean at the same time. One respondent agreed;

"Definitely, they think they have power when they are popular, so they abuse that power and hurt their peers."

Having power allowed a girl to be mean to other girls with very little fear of retaliation. In many ways this meanness could go uncontested as the

friends and peer group supported her actions. The girls from Yumi's group who dissed others for the way they ran at basketball were an example of the power of her popularity. Her comments went uncontested for fear that to challenge would put you in Yumi's firing line. This reputation for meanness acted as a deterrent to competition for popularity and confirmed Yumi's status as a high level popular girl.

Popularity and meanness seemed to come together with power as the common denominator. You could be nice and popular and mean and popular. In both instances the popularity gave rise to a power and confidence that meant that they could control the actions and words (to some extent) of the girls around them.

This use of power in relationships and friendships lead to disruptions in friendships as those who saw "mean" things happening felt disempowered and frustrated by their inability to challenge. Another respondent saw the connection between popularity and meanness:

"Being popular is a war. You need to be calculative, that's why popular girls are mean."

Consequently a lot of the challenges to the popular girls were covert, with the need to protect oneself for fear of having one's reputation ruined.

Sasha	*It was because I was … at first I was not like powerful at all then if you said something to one person and that person becomes scared of you then you become powerful*

Protection (and pre-emptive strikes)

Talk was power and power in many cases meant popularity. Sharing secrets and telling confidences was the biggest betrayal girls could imagine. Protecting oneself or hurting before being hurt was therefore one of the strategies girls used to "fight back."

Girls seemed to clamor over each other to gain the spoils of popularity. In this desire to be the most desired was a need to be calculating and clever in the way that meant a girl manipulated her friendships. The girls in this study discussed the concept of protection for themselves, with the girls in one focus group mentioning it specifically.

Jemma	*…and they want to like be mean first, so they don't get hurt. And when you first meet someone and you're mean to them first, then you can't be sad that they're mean to you*
Jemma	*It's kind of like a protection*

Jemma mentioned one of the reasons that girls were mean to each other was a type of protection. They engaged in these pre-emptive strikes in order to obtain or maintain some sort of power over another girl. Jemma felt that it was interesting that girls engaged in a type of pre-emptive strike at other girls aiming to hurt them before they engaged in being mean to her. It was an interesting observation – and one that links with the type of covert behavior that the girls in this research engaged in when they felt their friendships were being disrupted.

Jemma cited the insecurity of the popular group/girls as a reason why they engaged in this protective behavior. She also stated that one of the key reasons people were friends, was because they didn't want to be alone. There was no power, no popularity and no support if you were on your own.

Jemma	*The group's especially about one group. When they're alone, they're really nice to you because they don't like being alone – they always want to be with someone and so they're really nice to you and stick by you and they're like "can you wait for me" and stuff. But then when there's someone else that they know, then they're always with that person. Like their group – they always stick together. Yeah.*
Jemma	*Cause they're insecure?*
Renee	*It's like they're nicer when they're alone but when they're together as a group, it's sort of hard because they're popular.*

Insecurity around popularity was a key reason why girls engaged in these preemptive strikes. It alerted those around them to be on their guard and not to challenge the "pre-ordained" hierarchical structure that was in place.

Payback

Student 3	*I know. I hurt them – I feel bad. Well they hurt me and then I hurt them back.*

Throughout the focus group interviews it became clear that one of the reasons that girls behaved badly towards each other was payback for being hurt; payback for damaging someone's reputation; and payback for upsetting another friend who was unable to "stick up for themselves"; and payback for being popular. Payback was seen as something that was normal and natural to engage in when someone had committed a grievance against you. However, how one paid back was in line with actions that have previously been reported - it was covert and usually occurred beneath the radar of adults.

Student 1	*We don't start being mean to them, we start talking to them…*
Student 2	*…and then they're mean to us.*
Student 1	*…and then they're mean to us and we just be mean back.*

Payback was the excuse for being mean to someone. It seems that if a girl had been mean or hurt someone then it was accepted and common practice to reciprocate. Being mean commonly took the forms previously talked about – dissing, spreading rumors and gossiping negatively about a person or a group of people.

Paying someone back had a close relationship to popularity and status and also to reputation. Status was fluid and reliant upon your popularity or that of your friends. Reputations could be damaged with a forked tongue and a word to just the right person. As Delia stated – *"when you are mean to someone it's like, it's usually for a reason…. there's always something behind it."* Many of the reasons that the girls paid other girls back in this research was that they felt their friendship or popularity status was being threatened and that their reputations were in the balance. Significantly

the students were able to identity that payback was traceable to popularity.

Bullying

Responses from the questionnaire demonstrated that there was some blurring of meaning between bullying and meanness. When it came to being explicit about what bullying was the girls were not able to come to a definitive difference mentioning that, *"Bullying is like dissing and getting people to hate you. Being mean is just being mean."*
The complex nature of the way in which girls bully may have something to do with the reasons why they find it so hard to define.

Other girls mentioned the impact that bullying has upon the victim in the questionnaire: "Well they are similar, but being mean can be a habit, or something a bit more minor. Bullying is when you are trying to destroy someone's life." Delia in the focus group interviews stated:

"In 10 years people who are popular are just going to be like whatever but people who are bullied really badly sometimes will still be affected you know."

Throughout the study, the girls seemed to justify why it was okay to be mean and didn't label what they were doing as bullying. "*Bullying is when you just want to hurt someone but mean is when you have a reason to hurt that person."*

In the next section I will discuss the indictors of bullying identified in the study, including the events that are identified as bullying.

Indicators of Bullying

The ways in which the girls bullied was through the betraying of secrets and sharing of information through a variety of media. The girls indicated that bullying predominantly was through talk; spreading gossip and rumors behind the victim's back or through using social networking media such as *Bebo* and *My Space* as well as text messaging. Exclusion was also a technique employed by girls in this research – to single out and isolate the victim from her friends and support networks

<u>Dissing and gossiping</u>

The spreading of rumors and gossip was a ploy used extensively to destabilize the status and popularity of a girl. Although it was mentioned throughout the data as something that all girls did, it was clear that some girls engaged in a more intensive campaign of gossip in order to promote themselves amongst their peers. When it was done consistently and "intensively", the participants labeled it as bullying.

"Bullying is like dissing and getting people to hate you. Being mean is just being mean."

The objective of spreading rumors and malicious gossip about other girls was to hurt or turn peers against the girl in question. The spreading of rumors was used to call into question the actions or reputation of a girl and to discredit anything she might do or say.

"When rumors go around they just keep getting worse and worse."

Emily also noted that once you have a bad reputation (as a result of rumors, whether they are true or not), *"it's like really hard to shake off reputations."* Interestingly none of the girls mentioned that they had intervened to stop the spread of rumors.

Cyber bullying

The use of the internet and social messaging sites as well as text messaging, brought a whole new dimension to talk amongst girls.

"When I find out something new, well the first thing I do is mail my friends you know ….like when I'm not with them in class or something, then I say, guess what. There's this and that…"

Many of the girls within this research were technologically savvy. They had mobile phones with internet access and were able to utilize these skills widely. Emily mentioned that the phone was more practical and useful than a computer as, *"you can get online with it; you can take your hotmail with your phone and stuff. So like you don't need your computer."*

However, it was also mentioned that the cell phone could be used to bully and harass people. Michelle in a very forthright moment in the interviews shared with me a time when she was bullied by text messaging:

"They all sent me these mails like 'go die', 'go to hell', and 'get out of our life' and stuff."

As well as mass text messaging, Michelle mentioned that she was too scared to then go to school and *"face everything, cos they even sent pictures [videos] of them saying things."*

Michelle turned to her mother and grandmother for support to get through this difficult period – intriguingly she was philosophical about it

"That really affected my life and …..I've forgiven them now."

Michelle's friendship group were aware of the potential power of the internet to make or break friendships and to bully others. Whilst they didn't mention that they had used this medium before, they were well aware of girls in a grade above them who used it to bully girls and boys. Neela from grade 8 was mentioned as an example. She posted negative comments on a social networking site such as "My Space" about other students. While boys and girls in her grade challenged her and asked her *"what the hell she was doing"* she denied that she had done anything wrong – and so people backed down. However, Chloe saw the situation differently.

Chloe	*I see it from a different perspective cos she wrote me some stuff about my sister and her best friend. And my sister's best friend, she looks like the girl who did it so she got the blame for it. Now all these high schoolers are saying really mean stuff about her best friend and then my sister's being put into it too.*
Chloe	*So I mean it's affecting more than one person*
Chloe	*So its not just this girl who wrote it, it's affecting more than her*

Tania	*So do you classify that as being mean or bullying*
Chloe	*That's bullying*
Emily	*Bullying*

With text messaging becoming a more anonymous way of bullying, it seemed that there were inherent dangers, namely being misrepresented as the person who was doing the bullying.

<u>Exclusion</u>

Excluding a girl from a group of friends or from her peers was a way that girls in one focus group mentioned that they bullied.

"We really started to hate our friend, because she was being annoying. So then, my friends and I ditched her and prank called her."

The exclusion used was mentioned in the form of "ditching" someone but was also used in combination with other forms of bullying such as text messaging and spreading rumors. Being left alone or being alone was something that most girls feared. As has been mentioned earlier, all girls want to have friends and don't want to be left alone. Jemma and Renee noted that exclusion was the worst thing that could happen to you.

Jemma	*Excluded.*
Renee	*Yeah, excluded.*
Jemma	*I'd be okay if I was with somebody else that I could go to? But being excluded, means you're* **totally alone**

Being totally alone left no support in a bullying situation whereas being gossiped or talked about was seen as more manageable. In many cases the bullying was invisible and under the radar of the adults present. Because it was unseen and undetected it was often hard to explain what was happening. Stealth and manipulation of friendship groups was the bully's modus operandi when it came to excluding their victim.

"Yes when I was in 5ᵗʰ and 7ᵗʰ grade. Both times the bully told my closest friends not to talk to me or have anything to do with me."

The impact of bullying on the victim, and on others around the victim was well understood by the girls in this research. They were very clear as to why girls were mean to each other and were able to articulate the impacts of bullying upon them, their friendships and their lives.

Interestingly enough, the girls tended to bully each other for much the same reasons that they did to be mean. Mostly the participants mentioned that bullying came about because the bully wanted power, was jealous and competitive with the victim. It seemed that the intention was to hurt and destroy the reputation of the victim and prevent her from becoming more powerful – or popular than the bully was.

Sharon who had been the perpetrator of bullying recounted that there was no reason why she bullied except that *"I wanted to see people cry."* However later on in the interview she said that bullying gave her power. *"It was because…at first I was not powerful at all. Then if you said something to one person and that person becomes scared of you, then you become powerful."* Until Sharon herself was the victim of bullying – she didn't recognize that she

had become a bully and used her power to hurt others. After reflecting on both her experiences as the victim and the bully, she looked back at it and stated, *"I took advantage of it and I did it too much [bullying]."*

Other students in the questionnaires made the link to bullying and the imbalance of power and lack of control for the victim. The bully, one girl mentioned, was both popular and superior to the girl or girls she was victimizing adding weight to Sharon's assertion that power was the basis of bullying.

"The girl wants to show that they are superior and more popular and make you feel down."

Disrupting the self esteem of the victim was the key outcome for the bully. If the victim happened to be someone that she was competitive with, then this added to the power.

Competition and jealousy were also indicators of girls' bullying. Some of the participants mentioned that bullying occurred because girls were always in competition and jealous of each other. This jealousy ranged from being jealous of other friends or of another girl's boyfriend. The competition to be most popular in one's peer group was also cited as why girls bully.

"When you are competing with another girl (for class president or anything) they say bad stuff about you to get on your nerves."

As has been mentioned previously, jealousy and the desire to preserve one's popularity status were motivators for being mean. Being mean and bullying were the main ways that girls remained and maintained their popularity. Some girls were jealous of almost anything that threatened their status or popularity within the peer group.

The intention of the bully was to hurt the victim. As much as they may not have admitted at first (such as in Sharon's case), hurting someone either physically or mentally was the outcome desired by the bully. Renee mentioned that being mean was something that all girls did as a matter of their daily lives. However, she mentioned that not everyone bullied; in fact that only some girls were bullies and that the type of bullying that they engaged in which was a form of social manipulation differed to meanness in that it was more intense. Bullying she said *"is more mean….it's, like, meaner than mean."*

Renee	*Like being mean is more like kind of stuff that girls do all the time. But bullying is more – like not all girls do it. Like being mean and talking behind people's back – like all girls do that – yeah like Julia said. Bullying is more like intense I think.*
Tania	*Yeah. Do you think that being mean to somebody – that meanness can become bullying?*
Jemma	*Yeah.*
Renee	*If a person feels*

Dealing with the Bullying.

"There are people that are um awesome like some guys and also some girls that you just don't mess with…yeah

Throughout this study the girls mentioned that they had either experienced bullying either as the bully or the victim. A number of the girls mentioned that at times they didn't know if they had indeed bullied someone.

"No, at least I don't think I have. It's hard to figure out when you are the bully or not."

The responses and the lack of clarity between the answers in what was bullying and what was being mean seemed to indicate that there was a fine line between being mean and what was considered bullying. Many girls admitted anonymously that they had been mean to other girls *"I guess I can say that I have dissed about other girls ☺"* and in many cases were not proud of it. Their reasons for being mean were that they had been hurt and that it was a form of self defense.

Those who had been bullied and spoke about it in the focus group interviews were clearer about the differences. Michelle mentioned the *"power"* that came with bullying and the *"desire to see girls cry"*. Others who had been victimized talked about the *"hurt"* that they had experienced and the lack of support from "so called friends" who were supposed to be there for you and "have your back" no matter what might happen.

Some girls mentioned that they tried to subvert the actions of the bully.
"I tried to bully the bully back."

Other girls tried not to outwardly bully – fearing that should they do this then others would turn on them.

"I have never bullied another girl. If I have, then it means that the other person would bully you too as they say "what comes around goes around."

Whether it is defined as being mean or bullying, the actions that are taken in the name of gossip, dissing and exclusion are in order to maintain power over other girls. Many of the girls survived these bullying incidents and have moved on with their friendships – but others spoke of the impact that they can have on the person and friends around them.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In unpacking the data collected in this research it is important to refer back to the specific research questions that prompted the research originally. These centred more around the understanding that girls attached to their friendships and what they perceived as bullying due to the interconnected nature of girls relationships.

1. How do the dynamics of girls friendships influence the ways in which they bully?
2. How do girls perceive they construct their friendships? How does this impact upon the ways in which they bully?
3. What do girls perceive as bullying?

This chapter is divided in to four sections that report on the data gathered in chapter four.

Economies of friendship

Girls in this research formed friendships based upon a number of factors; reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing. The data indicates that there were a number of ways that girls formed friendships – through proximity (being in the same classes); being friends of friends; and sharing similar interests (music, an interest in boys). As many of the girls in this research were from a range of cultures and had traveled widely, their friendships took on a greater

importance. Friendships centered the girls and gave them a feeling of being connected.

Once these friendship groups were established, maintaining the friendship was a source of tension. The girls noted that they had "invested emotionally" in their friends and there was an expectation that once in a friendship you would reciprocate trust; be committed; be confidential and be a reliable friend. One respondent to the questionnaire noted that you *"had to be careful not to lose yourself"* in the friendship, inferring that at times a girl tended to conform to the expectations of the group that she was friends with.

The notion that there was more to friendship than just being friends was something that came through the data strongly. For most girls the success and strength of their friendships lay the strong "emotional investment" they had had in them. Douvan and Adelson (1966) cited in Griffiths (1995, p. 54) suggest close relationships are particularly strong during adolescence as girls experience "similar problems, and the process of identification is strong."

This sense of identification and investment with their friends was something that came out strongly in my data. In one focus group, the girls described how they relied emotionally on their girlfriends more than other people in their lives. Girl friends would, *"have ur bak"* and be there for you, regardless of the situation. Girls understood what other girls were going through. Sharon gave an example of this when she described how beginning puberty and menstruation was only something her girl friends could relate to. Michelle also shared intimately and emotionally

with her friends the issues she had with boys, as she disclosed with them *"always falling for the bad boys."*

The girls in this study emotionally invested in their friendships, disclosing intimate and personal details that heightened and highlighted the closeness of their bonds. This emotional investment is also the route to peer status according to Eder (1985). What is seemingly consistent with her research and the data from the three groups of friends I have interviewed, is a worrying trend that adolescent girls are more concerned with popularity than they are with achievement and success. Girls are concerned with being well liked and accepted and there tends to be clear link between friendship and self esteem (1985, p. 154).

Tentatively I would suggest here that the construction of girls friendships and the influence that this has on their social position, means that the girls in my research, tended not to challenge when bullying occurred for fear that they would be sideline from their friendship groups. As part of the social contract which implied all sorts of unwritten and unspoken rules, it was difficult for the girls in this research to accurately pinpoint what bullying was to them,

Social success seemed to be the key avenue for the girls in my research and friendships with popular girls and boys was the secret to success. Positioning within friendships was something that was implicitly understood by each of the girls in the focus groups. Rachel and Delia were perhaps the most interesting of the focus group interviewees in this respect because of their understanding of how popularity linked to

position within their friendship group and peer group, and their acute awareness of their own social position.

Rachel was arguably one of the most popular girls I interviewed. Her rise to popularity was three-fold; she was perceived as attractive and "hot"; she had a high social status (which was measure by being "hot" and "rich amongst these girls); and most importantly, she was dating a boy who was considered by the whole peer group as popular. *"Rachel's boyfriend is popular"* was one of the many comments that reflected Rachel's popularity. Rachel was sought after as a friend because of her popularity. Merten (1997) suggests that popularity is a "highly desired" trait amongst girls and that to win the friendship of a popular girl positioned a less popular one more highly by association. Rachel's position not only amongst her friends, but with her peer group made her a highly desirable friend to be with. Eder (1985) suggests also that friendships with popular girls were important avenues for a girl's status.

Delia on the other hand was a less desirable friend. She was friends with Rachel because of her association within the friendship group. However, Delia felt more strongly the competition to be popular. She felt rejected by Rachel, particularly when Rachel chose "more popular" friends to go to the movies with and abandoned Delia and the rest of the group.

Like we got really upset like because it seemed to us she preferred going with "popular people", like more popular people than us – so it kind of really hurt and we got mad at her.

Rachel, however, knew the tenuous balance between popularity and positioning, and while she preferred the company of her close friends she knew that at times, it was essential to 'play the game' and socialize with the popular people in order to get them on side and position herself more strongly with them *"I don't want to hang out with them because they're so mean…they talk about all you guys behind your back"*

Throughout the interviews Delia consistently tried to paint Rachel in a bad light, citing her of examples of "what not to do". Delia's resentment of Rachel can be seen as a reaction to Rachel's rejection of her. Eder (1985, p 163) suggests that the rejection by higher status people is likely to be somewhat painful, due to the loss of potential rewards that that friendship could otherwise produce. This resentment and rejection sat just beneath the surface for Delia:

You're always…yes you have friends that are popular too but you're always competing against each other – like a silent war, like you never really comfortable because you're um….everybody's competing. It's like your friend is so popular and you're not then other people are always picking her instead of you. Yup.

I would suggest that this study illustrates Hey's concept of economies of friendship: that friendships are "sites of power and powerlessness" (1997, p. 19). The girls in this research invested heavily in their friendships. They felt defined by their friendships, close to their friends who "understood" them and connected to their friends. All of the girls I spoke with were aware of the power dynamics operating within their friendship group and chose to resist or accept these dynamics.

<u>Power and popularity</u>

"There's a popular **nice** *girl but she's not as popular as a popular mean girl."*

Being popular was seen by the girls of Summer High School as a necessary capital for navigating the social economy of adolescent school life. Being popular or having a friend that was popular was going to make your life at Summer High infinitely more pleasurable than being unpopular. Popularity was seen as being highly desirable; it gave you a sense of capital in terms of being visible, accessing the "hot" guys having a sense of power over the rest of your peer group. Like money, popularity was intoxicating – the more a girl had of it and the power that came with being popular – the more she desired it. Gaining popularity was something that depended to a certain degree on privilege and high status; the peer group's perception of beauty; being attractive to the opposite sex – particularly the "popular" members of the opposite sex; and was intimately entwined with being "nice" and "likeable".

"So like you have to have that and then if you're nice you can be called popular but people will be really nice to you and they won't be as scared of you cos they think 'oh she's nice I'm not gonna be scared of her and I can talk to her'"

This ideological representation of "niceness" being an attribute of girlhood was held by many of the girls in the focus groups. In my data the attributes that not only made friend, but also a popular girl, were largely centered on the "nice" girl. Nice girls treated peers equally and cared about their feelings. Caring about other people in this way if you were popular reduced the social distance between individuals (Merten, 1997, p. 180) and made interactions more comfortable.

However in the positioning of a nice popular girl within this research, nice girls were seen as not being as powerful as mean girls. Hey suggests that "girls' networks are saturated by, as well as structured through, divisions of power." (1997, p. 33). If Rachel was the example of the nice popular girl, then Yumi was the very antithesis of it. Throughout the focus groups there was a shared reverence for and fear of Yumi and her group. She was both admired and feared: admired, because her high social status and exclusive friendship group was desired not only amongst those in her year group but by older high school students of both sexes. Yumi was also feared. She had the power to make life at school miserable with the sparking of a mere rumor, which not only had immediate effect but would, as the girls revealed, follow you throughout your time at Summer High School. Yumi's popularity allowed her to be mean to other girls because she was supported by the silence of her peer group. Her meanness was uncontested and so confirmed and symbolized her popularity within the peer group and demonstrated the silences and loss of voice that come to symbolize adolescent girls relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Hey, 1997; Simmons, 2002).

Merten suggests that there is a complex relationship between meanness and popularity. Both were a source of expression and social positioning. "Like popularity, meanness could be transformed into power. Hence, power is the common denominator between popularity and meanness." (Merten, 1997, p. 188). In the case of Yumi, her popularity was transformed into meanness, with power as the conduit for one to the other. Meanness was fundamentally, for Yumi and the other high status mean girls, a discourse about hierarchy, positioning and seeming invulnerability.

Talk - "The Secret Traders"

Central to girls' relationships was the feature of talk. Girls in this research described talk as the glue that bound them together. It was central to their everyday lives, in many instances the questionnaire and focus groups reinforced talk as one of the key activities that adolescent girls do. *"We hang out together; we like to talk in the halls…"* Talking is also what *"tears them apart"*.

Eder and Enke (1991) found from research that "gossip was a routine activity of adolescents" (p 494). The data indicates that the girls in this study enjoyed gossiping, mostly about celebrities and forthcoming events. In some cases the gossip was "exciting" about something new. In other cases, it had more sinister implications, in which gossip was passed on by mobile phone and could be used to target particular girls. Griffiths goes further to say that "close friendships between girls are based on trust, loyalty and confiding secrets." (1995, p. 5). Some of the girls in this study measured the closeness of their friendships by their willingness to share information:

"When a friend tells you a secret. That means that they trust you and are not afraid of telling a secret.

Trust was central to these girls. They trusted their friends to be there for them and to also safeguard the secrets that they told to them; secrets that strengthened their friendships and demanded a deeper level of loyalty. The attractiveness of a secret was not so much in the content of the secret but in being involved in the process which leads to having the

secret in the first instance. Secrets, Merten (1999, p. 109) suggests are an integral part of the social placement and positioning and because secrets were highly valued in adolescent girls social dynamics and relationships they were highly valued and in demand. Delia, in explaining reasons why she told, or in my terminology, traded secrets, said it was because at times it was too hard to tell the truth to someone.

"I think it's too hard to tell the person that. They have to tell somebody else."

However, throughout the course of the focus group interview, Delia was constantly positioning and repositioning herself in order to gain more leverage with the more popular girls within her friendship group. As the rejected friend, Delia explained a time when she had tried to "sell" another friend's secret and the implications that it had for her.

"I think it's bad when you tell a secret about someone and something and then they are mad at you for saying it, they say something untrue about you cos then it doesn't stop."

Because girls recognized that secrets implied a sense of closeness to another girl, they sometimes exaggerated or added to the secret in order to upset the instigator of the rumor, (in this case Delia), thereby managing to score higher points with others in the friendship group. One respondent to the questionnaire talked about why people upset friendships by trading secrets.

"When you pretend that you hate a person when you really don't and diss about them so you can be accepted in another group."

This indicated the **power** and ***value*** of the secret traders. Trading secrets was used not only to hurt or betray a friend – but was also used in order

to actively position oneself, in this case acceptance into another group of friends. Merten suggests that socially ambitious girls "gift" secrets about their former friend to their new friends (1999, p. 123) in order to position themselves favorably within the group. The secret itself was not the main commodity of value between these girls – it was the entrusting of the secret that had value and holding it in order to be able to "gift" and position oneself more favorably when needed.

Everyone feels bad, like [having your secret told] *secrets, like you did something bad or what's confidential between you and that person, yah…it makes you hurt. But like if it's something funny and you don't really care that everyone knows that kinda thing……*

Melody suggests that the value of the secret depended on what it meant to the person who told it. Sometimes secrets were told in order to be spread – if they were funny stories (as above) that you didn't mind sharing then in some ways they assisted in increasing your social status. Having a secret also implied a closer relationship to a person. Secrets could be used however to embarrass someone or to expose a weakness. "*When they let me down, such as embarrass me or tell a secret.*

Eder and Sandford (1986, p. 265) suggest that girls don't always understand the rules around trust and secrets and that there is "uncertainty about privacy norms." The girls in this study, however, took it upon themselves to decide what secrets were of value to divulge, in order to position themselves more favorably with their peer group. Rachel sharing that the "popular group" were mean about her friends created hurt for the girls, but demonstrated the power Rachel had in

terms of capital – being a confidant of both her friends and the "popular girls". Merten suggests that "knowing a secret was tantamount to owning it" (1999, p. 132), and that girls used secret information in order to manipulate their social positioning. Rachel knew she was in a position of power because her friends shared their secrets with her, but she also had the opportunity to share that information with more popular girls in order to increase her social currency with them. Whether she did so or not mattered little to her friends, the power lay in the "knowing" and possibility of sharing something that was considered personal.

The downside to being a secret trader, as can be seen with Delia, was that they were recognized as people who were not trustworthy and known as "big mouths". Untrustworthy friends caused disruptions to friendship for these girls and those disruptions and fractures were paid back by being mean.

Betrayal, Payback and Relational Aggression

Throughout the data analysis it was clear that the girls in this study placed a great deal of value upon friendships. The central premise of the friendships for the girls in this research was confidentiality, trust, sharing of interests and reciprocity of feelings and actions. These indicators were all highly significant and indicative of the emotional investment the girls had made in their friends.

The desire to become and the fear of being displaced as a girl's "close" friend appeared to be the basis for friendship negotiation for Delia and Rachel and other girls in this research. In order to preserve their

friendships and social positioning they engaged in covert forms of relational aggression. Negotiating one's position relied on being close to someone who was "popular". Hey, however, suggests that girls friendships are messy and when the rules are broken or trust is betrayed then a repertoire of emotions is unleashed that include payback and harming what most girls in this research value most – their friendships and positioning within them.

Relational aggression in this research was inextricably linked to being mean, the data indicating that for many girls it was impossible to distinguish between them both. Meanness had acquired meaning due to the interconnected nature of its relationship to popularity, competition, jealousy and the tensions that arise due to the intensity of the rewards that come with being friends with someone who is popular.

Throughout this study it became evident that the girls could not define what being mean was and how it was different to bullying. The girls definitions for being mean largely linked to that used by researchers for defining relational aggression as the intent to *"harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion."* Lagerspetz et al (cited in Simmons (2002), p. 21). Clearly in this study however, meanness and relational aggression were tools used to payback betrayals and to curb the fear of being displaced as a significant friend.

Betrayal and payback were significant findings in this research. The data shows that girls value trust and confidentiality and when their secrets are traded in order to increase someone's social position – it was considered

to be the ultimate betrayal. Michelle's experience of this was cited in the last chapter. She clearly had shared a confidence and then has been found out and therefore was shunned by her original friendship group which had tarnished her own reputation with the whole peer group – a fact that she was keenly aware of: *"I'm hated around here."* Michelle talked about spreading the secrets of a popular girl in her original friendship group because she had been mean to Michelle, and traded her secrets in a way Michelle thought was harmful. Michelle thought she had little choice but to get payback.

I know. I hurt them – I feel bad. Well they hurt me and then I hurt them back.

The consequences of payback could be as in Michelle's case detrimental. She was excluded from social events, and was the subject of an intense electronic bullying campaign.

"They all sent me these mails like 'go die', 'go to hell', and 'get out of our life' and stuff."

As well as mass text messaging, Michelle mentioned that she was too scared to then go to school and *"face everything, cos they even sent pictures [videos] of them saying things."* Payback in this case was an insidious campaign to harm Michelle. While Michelle's friends recognized this as bullying, her peers saw it as payback for a betrayal in confidence. As Delia stated *"when you are mean to someone it's like, it's usually for a reason…. there's always something behind it.*

Raskaukas and Stolz caution that this new form of relational aggression can have serious impacts on the psychological health of the victim, as the reach of electronic bullying transcends "beyond the playground and the 24 hour availability [means] such that children are not even safe from

bullying in their own homes." (2007, p. 565). In my study, trading secrets was a risky business.

Competition and the notion of not being openly competitive also emerged strongly in the data. Competition to be popular, and to be the "close" friends of a popular girl was a highly sought after resource. Delia was perhaps the most in tune with the covert way in which girls competed.

"Being popular is a war. You need to be calculative, that's why popular girls are mean."

"Being calculative" took on the form of spreading rumors, dissing about other girls and trading secrets. Delia, while being the least popular in her friendship group, was the most astute when it came to the maneuverings of information within a friendship.

You're always…yes you have friends that are popular too but you're always competing against each other – like a silent war, like you never really comfortable because you're um….everybody's competing. It's like your friend is so popular and you're not then other people are always picking her instead of you.

The discord between desiring something (such as popularity) and being open about competition was something that this study exposed as being a tension. Merten suggest that it is difficult to "mediate the opposition between solidarity with friends and competition for individual success." (1997, p. 189)

Relational aggression is inextricably linked to competition and betrayal for the girls in this research. The emotional investment in friendships meant that trust and confidentiality were highly prized. When a friend

broke that trust irreparably, then the subsequent fallout caused long lasting fractures. As Michelle stated:

"In 10 years people who are popular are just going to be like whatever but people who are bullied really badly sometimes will still be affected you know."

For girls in the midst of this maelstrom of adolescence the impact of relational aggression had serious and devastating effects. Relationships were intimately intertwined with popularity and trading secrets to gain status amongst peers. The secret traders had the power to promote or demote one's status; they were, for all intents and purposes, the ones who had the power.

Chapter 6

The Secret Traders

Given the importance of social status and popularity for the girls in this study, it is not surprising that they resorted to a number of relationally aggressive tactics to maintain their popularity and social position. The girls were emotionally invested in their friendships and in return they expected loyalty, trust and commitment. Friendships were formed through shared interests, proximity and through meeting friends of friends.

Friendships became more intimate with the sharing of information, secrets and dreams. Girls in this study entrusted their secrets like jewels to each other, they were a measure of the trust, intimacy and closeness of the friendship. The secrets had a dual purpose – particularly for this age group – where they connected with close friends on a deeper level. The sharing of secrets meant that you were a close confidant of the girl and that girls would trust and support each other and would assist in navigating the harsh and tumultuous waters of puberty. However, during this time, the emergence of popularity and being a popular girl gained prominence within this study. Popularity was social currency – and was seen as the necessary capital for advancement within a girl's peer group – the more popular a girl was, the more she was sought after as a friend, and the more powerful she was. Popularity and power were considered social currency with this group of girls, the more popular you were the more desirable you were as a friend, and the more powerful a popular

girl's circle of influence would be.

Gaining entry to the "popular" group was not always easy and the girls in this research devised a number of strategies to enhance their status. The sharing of secrets and rumors by a less popular girl was one way of trying to enhance her status. Sharing a secret with a popular girl not only gained you entrance into the inner sanctum, but also identified a girl as a member of the close circle of friends. Secrets took on a life of their own, being traded by some less popular girls in order to gain favor with those who were popular. Girls traded secrets to gain entrance into a higher status social group. The content of the secret wasn't as important as with whom the secret was shared with. However for the secret traders there was not always payback for sharing of the secrets. In fact, a less popular girl could make herself even more unpopular and be branded as a "big mouth".

Payback was two-fold. Payback was used as a way of paying back a friend's trust. If a girl shared a secret then she would be paid back with information from the friend she shared it with – hopefully bringing them closer and investing deeply in their friendship. However – payback was also an act of retaliation. In this study, less popular girls such as Delia, sought payback and retribution against those who they considered has slighted them or excluded them from something they desired, inclusion within their peer group. Payback was the modus operandi for the secret traders, the secrets traded did not have to be true - but they could be damaging.

Trading secrets was not seen by these students as bullying or relational

aggression. Rather they considered it to be protection of one's interests and social status. While the girls were able to identify the traditional forms of bullying, they were unable to see the linkages between relational aggression which they identified as being mean and bullying. Trading secrets was essential to positioning a girl more highly within the social strata of her peer group and this was done through spreading rumors and text messaging.

While text bullying emerged as a component in the way that girls are relationally aggressive, a more in depth investigation into the usage of this medium as a form of bullying would have to be initiated. What is clear are the psychological effects upon the victim. As Michelle divulged, messaging is pervasive, anonymous, constant, and can clearly victimize and re-victimize the victim out of the sight of teachers and parents. The tormentor is removed from the impact as they do not have to victimize face to face, it is all conducted through a medium that is largely anonymous.

The secret traders in this research did not see the difference between bullying, being mean and relational aggression. Their actions were more social manipulation to establish and maintain their positioning within their group of friends and peer group.

Limitations of the research

It should be noted that this research is based on a case study method and that the results that have been mentioned are specific to one case, one setting and one specific set of data collected. As such, it is important to

point out the limitations of this research.

The focus group, while being an effective source of data and interaction due to the groups, was made up entirely of friendship groups. While these groups opted into the project voluntarily, it is important to acknowledge that hierarchies within the group structure may have influenced the data. I have noted throughout the research process that in all three focus group interviews, the more popular members dominated discussion. This could skew the results of the research. Whilst every effort was made by me as the facilitator to include and be inclusive of all group members, it was clear that the dynamics within the friendship group dictated how comfortable members felt about discussing aspects of friendship. It is of note that the girls in one friendship group did halt the discussion with the excuse to go to the bathroom when they felt that they needed to "regroup" and re-position themselves when one member disclosed that they do talk about each other. Another group demonstrated a reluctance to disclose their views on girls and friendships. This could have been a cultural issue or it could have been that they simply needed more "lead in" time and familiarity and rapport with me as the researcher before they shared their opinions with me more openly.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the girls in this context it would have been ideal to have individual interviews with each of the girls in the focus groups and also spend time actively observing their interactions within the school context through participant observation. Should this research be replicated these are the two major changes I would incorporate.

The way forward

Bearing in mind the limitations of this research, I propose that there are a number of ways forward when working with adolescent girls and relational aggression. A multi-pronged approach is necessary. I suggest that education about the specific nature of girls' relationships could be expanded upon in schools with girls themselves; that educators further engage with their students in critical analysis of the influences on girls' relationships and the ways in which they conduct their friendships and bully; and that educators encourage girls to be aware of the social influences in their friendships in relation to bullying; and that girls themselves with are made aware that by being informed of their actions and what relational aggression is – that they will be conduits of change.

In New Zealand, there have been well-established anti-bullying programmes in primary and secondary schools. In conjunction with the previous health and physical education curriculum, these programmes allowed for open discussion and the opportunity to unpack the ways in which children bullied. From the data I collected from the focus groups, it seemed that girls could identify traditional forms of bullying but there was confusion when defining the differences between what is bullying and relational aggression. The girls in this research did not identify that spreading rumors and "destroying someone's reputation" was actually relational aggression - a form of bullying.

Encouraging students to be aware of and to be able to define relational

aggression is an important step in being able to address this issue which threatens to disrupt the friendships of girls. Including scenarios of relationally aggressive behaviors within lessons about bullying, would go some way to raising an awareness amongst girls and educators of some of the types of behaviors girls engage in and also provide opportunities to collectively discuss and role play solutions that would lend themselves to resolving issues before they come to light.

At the adolescent stage, girls could be encouraged to critique the social influences that have been identified in the research as having an impact on their friendships. Critiquing these influences in a safe and positive environment would in my view lend itself to girls being more aware of the multilayered influences on their lives and the impact that this has upon their friendships. Added to this, by developing solutions themselves, girls, I believe, would be in a stronger position to challenge their friends honestly and make decisions about who they will be friends with in a more informed and educated way. They may also be encouraged to stand up to others who perpetrate bullying in the form of relational aggression, by being able to identify it when it happens. Having a strong sense of self identity, self-esteem and self-awareness, I believe, are critical factors that must be taught alongside anti-bullying programmes.

As it has been noted in the literature, girls' friendships take on great importance during their teenage years. Another coping mechanism to deal with relational aggression could be the encouragement of girls to broaden their social circle from just school friends to incorporating other friends from sports, music or other leisure activities and interests. Having

parallel friendships would help in avoiding the hurt that comes when exclusive relationships break down or are disrupted. It could also assist in giving girls more control of their relationships and allow them greater independence and balance by have a range of friendship groups (Griffiths, 1995).

Providing educators of girls with a greater awareness of the forms of relational aggression and the impact upon girls' lives would also assist in raising awareness. Educators have a critical and influential role in helping shape the lives of their students. A greater awareness of what relational aggression is and the tools which girls employ to be relationally aggressive, as well as engaging in dialogue with the girls about how to solve their differences, would assist in reducing the impact upon those who suffer disruptions to their friendships. Rather than seeing relational aggression as "girls being bitchy", teachers and parents would be able to guide girls through disruptions to their friendships in a more proactive and constructive manner and help avoid these disruptions and the negative impacts before they occur. Providing opportunities to critique realistic scenarios, and providing a range of possible solutions would, I believe, enhance girls' coping mechanisms and resiliency.

Having an understanding of the social trends and dynamics in one's classroom would also enable educators to be aware of relational aggression. As well as using tried and tested anti bullying programmes such as "Kai Kaha", a greater emphasis on building positive classroom relationships would encourage sharing, dialogue and critique around relational aggression and other issues that have an impact on girls' friendships.

Parents are generally the ones who pick up the pieces of their daughter's fractured friendships. Bringing parents in to meetings before units on bullying/relational aggression are taught would be advantageous. In this way, parents too would be familiar with the types of relational aggression girls engage in and would also be able to engage in dialogue with their daughters during the unit of work – allowing them to legitimately ask their children about their friendships and the ways that girls bully. The triangulation of conversation between school, student and parents is, I believe, critical in raising awareness about relational aggression and in empowering girls to discuss the impact that disruptions to their friendships has on their social and school lives.

Adolescents, teachers and parents need to be aware of the non-traditional forms of bullying (cyber bullying, relational aggression) as well as the more traditional forms of bullying. Being aware and being able to offer solutions to the impact that bullying has on children (particularly the less resilient children) is important. Social media has taken on a more central role in teenagers' lives. However, the negative effects of having one's live exposed to the world can be devastating for children. I have earlier cited stories of girls who have been bullied by text messaging, with the extremes of this leading to suicide. In this fast paced and anonymous world of social media, it is important that students, parents and teachers alike understand the positive and negative impacts of social media and are able to manage online friendships and relationships through this medium. As it is often anonymous, the bullies don't necessarily see the impact until it is too late.

Advocacy with media outlets is also essential to draw attention to

relational aggression. A two-pronged approach could be taken to this end. Movies such as "Mean Girls" are a vital tool for teachers to use to critique some of the components of relational aggression as I did within my focus group interviews. They allow for "safe" discussion and the opportunity to raise issues without necessarily having girls share their personal experiences in a direct manner or expose challenges within their own friendship groups. Using popular scenario based films allow girls to comment and develop more critical insights to their own friendship worlds.

Secondly, there are opportunities to proactively engage the media to highlight relational aggression and to start dialogue amongst the public as to what relational aggression is and what might be possible community solutions to the issues facing girls in their teenage years. Much of the recent news media in New Zealand had focussed upon girl gangs and the physical violence associated with bullying but has failed to address the relational aggression which can be just as damaging psychologically to girls. Pitching stories, articles and examples of relational aggression to the media with success stories of individuals and schools who have addressed these issues is one way to raise public awareness and elevate the importance of interpersonal relationships for girls during their teenage years. Providing opportunities for girls to voice their opinions, experiences and solutions in print or on the airwaves, would I believe, open the door to a more honest and positive look at the secret lives of girls' friendships. It is evident from the research and literature that much is invested in friends during the teenage years, and that this influences and shapes their futures. By providing opportunities to honestly address disruptions to friendships and bullying, girls would be able to address

issues of relational aggression in a more proactive and critical way.

Relational aggression is an issue that with the pressures on adolescent girls in today's world should be addressed. Teenage girls highly value their friendships and assisting them with understanding and navigating their friendships will, I believe, allow for positive and long lasting relationships during adolescence and in the future.

Yeah we can always laugh together. Yeah like you're lonely, sad or upset. Like these guys they know how to put a smile on my face, they know how to comfort me. They know what to do when I'm sad, they make me laugh and I think that's really important. Like when someone is sad to make them happy is good.

Appendix 1:

Consent forms

Child's Consent form
DATE:

CHILD'S CONSENT FORM
Examining the dynamics of adolescent girls' friendship groups and the influence this has on bullying.

Tania McBride has talked to me and asked me if she can talk to me about girls and their friendships and how girls are mean to other girls. I understand that I will fill out a questionnaire as well as talk about friendships. I understand that we will discuss our ideas and feelings about short movie clips we will see about girls' friendships. I also understand that I do not have to do anything that I do not want to do or say anything that I do not want to say.

What I say may be included in the project but will not have my name on it. Tania will not keep any notes about me once the project is finished. Tania's supervisors will read the report to decide how well she has written it.

If I change my mind at any stage, up until and including the writing of the report, I don't have to continue and can withdraw my comments and ideas.

I know that our talk will be tape recorded.

I am doing this to help Tania with her University work. If Tania thinks she can help me, she will talk to my parents or teachers.

I agree to take part in this project.

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Parent Consent form

DATE:

PARENT CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the description of the above named project. On this basis, I agree to my child being a participant in the project. I consent to the publication of these results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved and that the notes will be destroyed at the end of the project.

I understand that I may withdraw my child at anytime from this project, including the withdrawal of any information that has been provided. I consent to the discussions being audio-taped.

NAME(please

print)…………………………………………………………

…..

Signature:

Date:

Tania McBride

Signature:

Date:

<u>Participant information form</u>

Dear

PARENT/CHILD PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The dynamics of adolescent girls' friendship groups and the influence this has on bullying'.

Your child is invited to participate as a subject in the research project, "Examining the dynamics of adolescent girls' friendship groups and the influence this has on bullying."

The aim of this project is to examine the nature of girls' friendships – the way in which they socialize with each other and the impacts that this has on the ways in which they bully. A key purpose, or outcome of this, is to then suggest ways in which children (girls) and teachers can contribute to forming healthy and positive relationships within their peer groups.

Your child's involvement in this project will be through participating in a group interview (consisting of 3-4 other girls) in a 50 – 60 minute informal discussion.

The results of this project may be published, but you can be assured of the complete confidentiality of the data gathered in the investigation: the identity of the participants will not be made public. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants will not be referred to by name in any written documentation and all raw data will be destroyed at the end of the project. The only exception to this is if the researcher believes the participant is in any danger. If this happens, professional ethics requires that this will be discussed with the supervisors for guidance. One of the supervisors will contact you to discuss what steps will be taken.

This project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master of Teaching and Learning degree by Tania McBride, xxx. The project is under the supervision of Dr. Gillian Tasker, Principal Lecturer in Health Education, School of Secondary Teacher Education, Christchurch College of Education and Graeme Ferguson, Senior Lecturer, School of Professional Development, Christchurch College of Education. Should you have any concerns, Gillian can be contacted on 343-7780 ext 8461.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Christchurch College of Education's Ethical Approval Committee and Academic Research Committee. A consent form is attached.

Should you have any complaint concerning the manner in which this research project number is conducted, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethical Clearance Committee.

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Regards
Tania McBride

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