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**Femininity, faculty and feelings:  
An investigation of the emotional wellbeing of year 13 women, in the context of  
school-constructed femininity.**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the emotional wellbeing of female adolescents is influenced by constructions of femininity in a single-sex high school environment. From one single-sex high school, four young women aged between 17 and 18 years of age and two teachers were asked to be a part of this study.

A qualitative approach was used to elicit thick description of participants' constructions of femininity and emotional wellbeing. Underpinned by interpretivist and social-constructivist understandings, this inquiry sought to build understanding of these constructions by accessing the meanings assigned by participants through and of the experiences they have with the world around them. Qualitative data collection methods were therefore used, including semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups.

Data were analysed according to themes, with categories and patterns drawn from the data as they emerged. Key themes from this study demonstrated that the school curriculum, teachers, religious expectations, family experiences and peer group pressures directly influenced student feminine gender constructions. Alongside this, peer pressures to be feminine, negative perceptions of self body image, confusion of self and gender-identity, inadequate school health education and negative stigma surrounding mental and emotional health negatively affected student emotional wellbeing.

From these results, various implications have emerged. First, single-sex schools and their teachers should work to eliminate gendered stereotypes that might restrict young women's interests and opportunities. Second, teachers and schools need to be aware of female peer dynamics and seek ways to facilitate healthy relationships and identity development of students. Further, health education personnel should factor in female peer group dynamics when implementing emotional wellbeing programmes, curriculum and policy initiatives aimed at female adolescents. Finally, students need realistic and relevant health education that supports understandings

and coping strategies for self-esteem, identity confusion and perceptions of body image. Health education also needs to promote a positive view of mental and emotional health and encourage the use of the school's mental health service.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Over time, understandings of health and wellbeing have changed and developed. A shift has been made from seeing health as a predominantly physical state, to one that is subject to social and emotional influences (Clelland, 2011). As well as there being increased recognition regarding the importance of emotional wellbeing (Durie, 1998; Stephens, 2008), health is seen as a resource for life rather than an absence of illness or injury. Many frameworks demonstrate the interplay between physical, mental/emotional, social and spiritual health. Each of these aspects affect one another; emotional wellbeing therefore affects and is affected by other aspects of health.

Literature in the fields of education and psychology has documented the importance of emotional wellbeing. An increased focus on children and adolescents' emotional wellbeing has developed, having been shown to have positive effects on school success, life satisfaction, confidence, family and community contribution and social skills. Sound emotional wellbeing in childhood and adolescence is linked to positive emotional health and effective emotion management in adult years (Carroll-Lind, 2009). Emotional wellbeing is increasingly at the forefront of international and national health and education strategy and policy (WHO, 1986; Department of Health, 2004; Public Health England, 2011; National Prevention Council, 2010).

Although emotional wellbeing has attained greater importance over the past decades, this is not necessarily reflected in the school curriculum. Health education in schools for instance, where emotional wellbeing would be an appropriate focus, is only compulsory up until the end of Year 10 (Cushman, 2010). Inadequate health education for senior high school students is suggested to a) negatively affect students' understandings of mental and emotional health (Macklem, 2011), b) inhibit students' use of skills and management strategies needed to deal with

mental and emotional challenges (Allen, 2005), and c) encourage students to rely on health education received before Year 11 and the understandings they assume from the environment around them (Fenton, 2012). This is concerning as senior students experience physical, cognitive and social changes that are altogether different to those in their junior high schooling years (Collins, Lidinsky, Rusnock & Torstrick, 2012). A wide range of literature supports the need for health education to continue into students' senior years of schooling and deems current health education for senior school students as irrelevant and unrealistic to student needs (Allen, 2005; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Fenton, 2012).

Feminine gender constructions have shown detrimental effects on student emotional wellbeing and understandings of self-identity in female single-sex high school environments. Within these environments, students are exposed to a myriad of messages that influence the way individuals 'should' look, dress, interact and behave (Markson, 2004). Literature has highlighted negative body image perceptions, peer expectations, alcohol consumption and sexual activity as pressures that are exerted on young women to be feminine (Markson, 2004; Read, 2011). These feminine constructions are known to negatively affect student self-esteem, resilience, self-identity and general emotional wellbeing (Rudman & Glick, 2001). With these pressures being exerted upon young women, and limited health education provided to students to manage these challenges, student emotional health is at risk.

### **Significance of the study**

Students in female single-sex high schools are influenced by many factors that shape their identity as young women. With such influences affecting the emotional health of students, it is important to investigate this issue further to enhance the wellbeing of all young women. These influences however are broad and literature has not made specific reference to older female adolescent age groups. Much literature surrounding this topic comes from international sources. Thus, further New Zealand research that identifies more specific determinants of adolescent females'



femininity construction, emotional wellbeing and self-identity is needed (Horn, Newton & Evers, 2011; Williford, 2011; Guyer et al., 2014).

### **Topic and aim of the study**

This study will investigate femininity constructions within the school environment and the influences on student emotional wellbeing. In doing so, findings of this research will contribute to several bodies of knowledge, increasing the understanding of adolescent emotional wellbeing for both health researchers and educators. As stated in the following literature review, general health and wellbeing has been a widely researched area. However, with recent emphasis on the importance of emotional wellbeing, greater understanding in this area is needed, particularly in relation to adolescent females (Merry & Stasiak, 2011; University of Auckland, 2012). With a rapidly changing society, new technology and increasing societal expectations, continued research is required to determine current and changing influences over adolescent emotional wellbeing (Carroll-Lind, 2009).

### **Research questions**

#### *Primary Research Question*

- How is the emotional wellbeing of female students influenced by constructions of femininity in a single-sex high school environment?

#### *Secondary Research Questions*

- What are students' experiences of emotional wellbeing? What factors impact on or contribute to student emotional wellbeing?
- What do teachers perceive of students' emotional wellbeing and the contributing factors?
- What are teachers' perceptions of how femininity is constructed in the school environment?
- What are female students' perceptions of how their femininity is constructed in the school environment, and how is this supportive of their wellbeing?

- How are these respective perceptions at odds or in tandem, and what are the implications of this for the promotion of female students' wellbeing?

### **Context**

A single-sex high school is a suitable environment for this study of adolescent femininity and emotional wellbeing due to it being a central place in which influential social interactions and experiences take place. Understandings of femininity and emotional wellbeing in the school environment are important from many perspectives; for health educators this understanding will assist with imparting knowledge, skills and building resilience in pupils. For students, health education built on these evidence-based teacher and pupil-informed understandings will enhance its relevance and responsiveness. This study is conducted in a Catholic single-sex girls high school and involves four student and two teacher participants. Year 13 students were asked to be a part of this study, with the aim of investigating influences upon senior student femininity and emotional wellbeing.

### **Summary**

The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter One is the introduction and sets the purpose and objectives of this study. Chapter Two explores literature relating to health and wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, femininity, health education and the school environment. Chapter Three discusses the methodology and research design utilised. Chapter Four reports the findings from data collection and Chapter Five discusses these findings in relation to previous literature. Finally, the concluding chapter highlights implications of this research for schools, health practitioners and policy makers and outlines areas for future research.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Literature

#### 2.1 Health and wellbeing

Existing since 1948, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has defined health as a “...state of physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2006). This definition is evident throughout many frameworks of health and wellbeing. Over time, understandings of health and wellbeing have changed and developed. Since its introduction, psychology has considered the cognitive, mental and emotional elements of wellbeing and has recognised the interplay between mind, body and social life (Stephens, 2008). And so, a shift has been made from seeing health as a physical state, to now realising the social and emotional influences upon health (Clelland, 2011).

Health is multifaceted and is known as ‘broad based’ (Stephens, 2008, p. 13) where social determinants (such as poverty, social exclusion, education, unemployment and poor housing) have been shown to have significant influence over health outcomes. In reference to the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986), health is seen as a resource for life, rather than an objective of living. It is shown to be a positive concept incorporating people’s social, personal and physical resources.

In the New Zealand context, the ‘Whare Tapa Whā’ framework developed by Durie (1982, cited in Durie, 1998) is consistent with this holistic approach. Whare Tapa Whā incorporates four dimensions of wellbeing: te taha hinengaro (psychological health), te taha wairua (spiritual health), te taha tinana (physical health) and te taha whānau (family health). This framework is recognised throughout New Zealand and underpins health education at both primary and secondary levels.

- *Te taha wairua* is acknowledged by Māori to be an integral requirement for health. This encompasses religious beliefs and practices, relationships with the environment, between other people, and with one’s heritage. Spirituality is

thought to be integral for identity development and a fundamental aspect of wellbeing (Durie, 1998).

- *Te taha hinengaro* embraces thoughts, feelings and behaviours; aspects viewed as being vital to health, whilst also recognising that the mind and body are inseparable.
- *Te taha tinana* is concerned with physical wellbeing and the capacity for physical growth and development. An important link is made between the effect of mental and emotional states (such as stress) on physical health.
- *Te taha whānau* represents connectedness, relationships, and the need for family care (both culturally and emotionally) in order to support one's physical, emotional and spiritual health (Durie, 1998).

Together, these dimensions reflect or are consistent with the WHO's definition of health and demonstrate each dimension as being pertinent to having full health and wellbeing.

The WHO (2006) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model suggest that health is influenced largely by sociocultural aspects; for example, lifestyle, politics, culture, economics and social factors. Health education in New Zealand schools aims to incorporate these sociocultural factors as students learn the consequences of these on health and wellbeing at individual, national and global levels. The New Zealand curriculum recognises this as a learning area, stating that students should be "understanding of the factors that influence the health of individuals, groups and society" (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p. 23). New Zealand health education is concerned with students understanding and recognising aspects that enhance their wellbeing and how to contribute to the health and wellbeing of others and society. Students are also encouraged to recognise how determinants of health impact on individuals, relationships and society. A shift has been made from seeing health as disease-focused to encouraging learners to view health holistically, while recognising social relationships as central to emotional wellbeing (Clelland, 2011).

A shift from traditional views of health allows us to understand the social nature of health and the importance of societal structures and factors in determining people's

wellbeing (Stephens, 2008). These social factors include support/relationships, acceptance/approval, exclusion and stress (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2006). Stephens (2008, p. 62) states, “if things are going badly for a person’s social status, social support and child development, evidence suggests that this will affect important psychological outcomes such as a sense of control, self-esteem, depression and hostility”. Thus, if wellbeing, or more specifically emotional wellbeing, is to be enhanced, one must consider how an individual relates to others and the social environment around them. It is suggested therefore that in order to enhance the wellbeing of adolescents, the social context of an individual’s health must be acknowledged and addressed. An example of this is how gender is constructed within school environments and how these constructions may affect the emotional wellbeing of adolescents (Clelland, 2011).

## **2.2 Emotional wellbeing**

Emotional wellbeing involves managing and recognising emotions, handling challenging situations effectively, developing a care for self and others, being a part of positive relationships and making logical and responsible decisions (Clelland, 2011). Similarly, emotional wellbeing may also be defined as ‘one’s ability to look after their emotional needs or how developed their emotional skills to deal with challenges are’ (Day & Francisco, 2013, p. 4). This definition may be expanded to involve happiness, confidence, autonomy, resilience and self-esteem (Watson, Emery, Bayliss, Bouchel & McInnes, 2012; Merry & Stasiak, 2011). Emotional wellbeing has shown to be an important aspect of health with influences over physical, spiritual and social wellbeing (Watson et al., 2012).

An increased focus on child and adolescents has emerged as positive emotional wellbeing has shown to have positive effects on school success, life satisfaction, family and community contribution and social skills (Carroll-Lind, 2009). Conversely, those with poor levels of emotional wellbeing may be more inclined to bully or be a victim of bullying. These individuals may have reduced levels of confidence and self-worth as well as limited social relationships (Merry & Stasiak, 2011; University of Auckland, 2012). Literature suggests that today’s adolescents are dealing with a

wide range of social and emotional issues, stemming from a lack of connection within the community, reduced family support, decreasing age of pubertal development as well as gender, peer and media pressures. Adolescents are demonstrating these issues within their communities and schools, exhibiting mental and emotional health problems involving bullying, unhappiness, anger, stress, anxiety and depression (McCreanor, Watson & Denny, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Social status and relationship influences on emotional wellbeing**

Social status and peer relationships are shown to be a major determinant of emotional wellbeing and constructions of femininity, particularly for adolescents. According to Marmot (2004), individuals position themselves in society based on their own and others' expectations, peer and group roles, physical and personal characteristics and successes and failures (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner & Hamby, 2005). As mentioned previously, those deemed low social status have been shown to be more susceptible to bullying within their peer group. Comparatively, those of higher social status are more resilient, confident and believe in their own self-worth and competence. They also display a wider array of social relationships, challenge themselves and support their own ideas and decisions (Clelland, 2011; Carroll-Lind, 2009). Battling with social status proves to be difficult for adolescents. Faced with a wide array of expectations, adolescents are judged and influenced by opinions, beliefs, trend-setting, popularity, socioeconomic status, school pressure, fashion, media and peer expectations. These factors work to define social status, and consequently, emotional wellbeing can be negatively affected when an individual is unable to meet these social status demands (McBride, 2011; Wright, 2008).

Literature suggests that peers and family may largely influence social status. To gain social acceptance, adolescents are likely to give into social norms to meet expectations of their peers (Cowan, 2010; McBride, 2011). For example, a teenage girl may choose a particular type of dress when she is shopping, or may use certain words or phrases around her peer group. Thus, peers can act as a direct influence over a person's choices, decision-making, opinions and physical appearances (McBride, 2011). Through this, emotional wellbeing may be jeopardised as an

individual may lose their own sense of identity, or construct/formulate an identity based on other people's perceptions, expectations or opinions (McBride, 2011; Wright, 2008). Furthermore, peer groups may define a person's self-worth. For those who are rejected from peer groups and high social status, an individual's perceived self-worth may decline, reducing their emotional wellbeing (Carroll-Lind, 2009). An adolescent in this situation may experience feelings of hopelessness, isolation, loneliness and rejection. Peer influences prove to be predominant in adolescent lives, however future research is needed to explore this issue further in order to understand how peer influence involved in gender construction affects adolescent emotional wellbeing.

### **2.2.2 Self-esteem and resilience underpinning emotional wellbeing**

Self-esteem is a popular concept used within health sciences, education and psychology, with over 35,000 publications on the subject (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). It is considered a fundamental human need (Allport, 1955) and is a crucial aspect of adolescent emotional wellbeing (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). William James first introduced self-esteem as a construct in 1890. James viewed this construct as capturing the sense of positive self-regard that develops when individuals consistently meet or exceed the important goals in their lives. More than 100 years post this introduction and as this concept became further understood, self-esteem more specifically became understood as, 'the evaluative aspect of self-knowledge that reflects the extent to which people like themselves and believe they are competent' (Brown, 1998; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Other researchers have perceived self-esteem as a concept involving feelings of self-respect and self-acceptance:

When we speak of high self-esteem, then, we shall simply mean that the individual respects himself, considers himself worthy; he does not necessarily consider himself better than others, but he definitely does not consider himself to be worse; he does not feel that he is the ultimate in perfection but, on the contrary, recognises his limitations and expects to grow and improve. Low self-esteem, on the other hand implies self-rejection,

self-dissatisfaction, self-contempt. The individual lacks respect for the self he observes (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 31).

Similarly, Gilligan (2000) suggests that self-esteem derives from an individual's sense of his or her own competence and worthiness. It is thought to generally involve a comparison by an individual in regard to how they think they measure up and the person they would like to be. If an individual likes herself and sees herself as a 'worthy person', then she has high self-esteem regardless of her traits, levels of social acceptance or actual abilities (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Thus, self-esteem is an individual's *subjective* evaluation of the self.

An individual may have varying levels of self-esteem, ranging from low to high. High self-esteem involves the individual having a positive and favourable view of their self. In contrast, low self-esteem refers to an individual evaluating their self in ways that are negative or uncertain (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley & Lehman, 1996). Although both low and high self-esteem relate to a person's perceptions of the self, environmental influences may alter the way in which that person creates these perceptions. For example, commonly in the adolescent age group, individuals are particularly susceptible to conforming to normative behaviour, social and peer pressures as well as family and school expectations and influences (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011). The positivity or negativity involved in these experiences may influence the way an individual constructs their sense of self and self-esteem. For example, if an individual experiences difficulty in fitting into a peer group, their self-esteem may lower due to feelings of inadequacy and unsuitableness (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011). Or, for high-achieving individuals, their high levels of self-esteem may be contingent on their accomplishments or attributes, or these self-worth feelings may not have anything to do with any sort of objective appraisal of the individual. Thus, self-esteem is not necessarily an inaccurate or accurate reflection of 'reality'. Typically in adolescent phases, female individuals may view themselves based on the way they *think* others perceive them (Zeigler-Hill, 2013).



Adolescent individuals often desire high levels of self-esteem. These individuals engage in various strategies in order to enhance and maintain their feelings of self-esteem. For example, individuals with high levels of self-esteem are likely to adopt active strategies to increase their feelings of self-worth. In comparison, individuals with low self-esteem are more focused on not losing or conserving the limited self-esteem resources that they already have (Baumeister, Tice & Hutton, 1989). Moreover, those individuals with low self-esteem are likely to employ self-protective strategies. These strategies are often concerned with minimizing the attention to the self, conforming to social norms while often afraid of being too different and attempting to prevent their 'poorer' personal qualities from being noticed by others. These individuals often behave in ways that allow them to be conservative and cautious. It is also suggested that individuals with low levels of self-esteem are often reluctant to risk rejection or failure, unless they feel it is necessary to do so (Josephs et al., 1992).

Differing from those with low self-esteem, high self-esteem individuals employ their esteem as a resource that protects them from possible failure or rejection. Meaning, high self-esteem individuals are often less affected by experiences that are negative and recover from these negative experiences more easily than individuals with lower self-esteem. It is thought that a person with low self-esteem has a greater potential for loss compared with a person with high self-esteem. This is because low self-esteem individuals often lack the resources they need to buffer themselves against low self-esteem threats including negative experiences like rejection and failure (Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

Research in recent years has come to understand predictable age differences in self-esteem across an individual's life span. A generalisation of this understanding is that self-esteem levels decrease as an individual transitions from childhood to adolescence (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling & Potter, 2002; Kling, Hyde, Showers & Buswell, 1999; Major, Barr, Lubek & Babey, 1999), and then increase in early adulthood, reaching a peak in the middle of adulthood and declining again in older age (Orth, Trzesniewski & Robins, 2010; Galambos, Barker & Krahn, 2006). It is

interesting to note that during childhood both girls and boys have comparable levels of self-esteem. However, during adolescence boys often report higher levels of self-esteem than girls (Kling et al., 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). These gender differences first emerge in adolescence and are also the time in which these differences are the largest (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). In questioning why there is a more pronounced drop in self-esteem for adolescent girls, it has been suggested that this might be a result of subtle forms of sexism within the school and classroom. An example of this is teachers treating girls differently from boys, such as through boys receiving more attention in class, studying topics in class related to male interest and holding higher expectations for boys than girls in subject areas typically classified as male subjects. Another likely reason includes girls' negative attitudes regarding their body image, whereas boys tend to retain positive attitudes about their appearance. Also, girls' self-esteem is related to prescriptive gender norms entailing female roles and modesty as well as concerns about being overweight, having physical abnormalities and mental illness (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Decreased self-esteem in adolescence is suggested to be due to changes in the educational context and adolescents having an increased awareness of social expectations and pressures (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Often within this age group, adolescent individuals move away from formal family life to more intimate relationships with romantic partners and peers. Adolescents try to learn and gauge their place in social groups, understand their own self-identity and negotiate acceptance and rejection within social realms. In doing so, social belonging is important and adolescents become more at risk of low self-esteem, unless they carry the skills needed to monitor and cope with self-esteem challenges (Ohlhaber, 2011). Researchers have highlighted the need for schools to explore self-esteem and the factors that influence self-esteem in adolescent lives. Students should be equipped with understanding their own self-esteem and the skills needed to overcome phases of low self-esteem (Macklem, 2011). Such education is important in maintaining and enhancing the overall emotional wellbeing of adolescent individuals.

### **2.3 Gender**

Gender (femininity and masculinity) refers to the social constructions of behavioural differences relating to sex (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Femininity and masculinity are two terms which are a part of the 'structural properties of society' and are dependent on social, historical and cultural constructions (Clelland, 2011, p. 15). Thus, it is crucial to understand gender as developed through social interactions, rather than just a biological or individual construct.

Gender is considered to be an important aspect of self-identity throughout the life course and is influenced heavily by cultural norms, peers and societal expectations (Patterson, 2012). Various social-developmental theorists have shown that girls and boys develop cognitive schemas for gender, based on the environment they are observing (Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Halverson, 1981). These schemas may involve knowledge of traits and behaviours associated with being feminine or masculine. Throughout childhood and adolescence, individuals develop their 'own' schema and select environments and activities that match with their own sex schemas (Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Over time, children and adolescents learn gender-role-consistent behaviours through experience, socialization and cognitive learning. Age is shown to be a moderator of gender differences and these differences become more pronounced as age increases. Thus, both broader societal expectations and specific environments for both female and males influence gender (Patterson, 2012).

Gender, which is based on a wide range of personal traits, interests and appearances, is often linked to and influenced by peer interactions (Patterson, 2012). It is noted that adolescents and young adults exhibit stronger gender attributes when amongst their own peers. Because peer contexts are usually segregated by gender, this may produce gender-typical expectancies and expectations that males and females follow. For example, male peer groups may encourage rough and physical play, and female peer groups may encourage cooperative and noiseless play (Latu, Mast & Kaiser, 2013; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Other research reveals that gender may be used by individuals to evaluate others.

These evaluations are then used to guide that individual's own behaviour (Latu et al., 2013). Adding to this, culture acts as a force upon gender norms (attributes and behaviour). For example, some communities regard soccer as a masculine activity. However, in other communities, soccer may be viewed as a mixed gendered activity. Finally, emotional wellbeing is linked to gender practices. Those children and adolescents with gender consistent behaviours have higher levels of emotional wellbeing. This is thought to be because a person with gender consistent behaviours is more likely to have the knowledge and behaviour needed for social acceptance (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Latu et al., 2013).

### **2.3.1 Femininity**

Femininity may be defined as 'constructions, traits and practices that shape members of a social group towards being appropriately female' (LaCrosse, 1994). Although limited research exists regarding constructions of the adolescent female gender (Horn et al., 2011), literature demonstrates some significant pressing influences on young women and their expectations to be feminine. For many female adolescents, sociocultural demands influence expectations for development and normative ways of being (Berger, Grob & Flammer, 1999). These demands are often shown to be conflicting and confusing for an individual's self-identity development (McBride, 2011). The following paragraphs will discuss various sociocultural influences of femininity including societal demands, peer groups, media and role models. The final paragraph will examine emotional characteristics of femininity while identifying the consequences of this on health and wellbeing.

A framework proposed by Berger et al. (1999) encapsulates the role of developmental tasks, social-cultural demands, knowledge, expectations and gender roles. This framework provides an overview on how these concepts interrelate and the sociocultural expectations placed on women to meet normative development task goals. A development task is defined as 'a task that arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual' (Berger et al., 1999, p. 274). Development tasks are culturally and socially desirable by the majority of people. When these tasks are met at certain point over the life span, this is considered 'normative' (Berger et al.,

1999, p. 274). Normative developmental tasks are ‘those which are meant for all persons in a specific culture who belong to a certain developmental stage’ (Berger et al., 1999, p. 274). When normative developmental tasks are met successfully, this increases an individual’s emotional wellbeing and self-esteem, as well as the probability of coping well in the future. Reaching these normative concepts also generates approval, acceptance and support from parents and peers (Kirchler, Pombeni & Palmonari, 1991; Berger et al., 1991).

Sources of developmental tasks include bio-physical change, sociocultural demands and individual-psychological aspirations/values, approached or encountered in stages/phases. It is important to note that each developmental task originates from more than one source, and all three sources contribute to the construction of new developmental tasks in adolescence:

- For example, hormonal changes during puberty, which is first a bio-physiological occurrence – the first phase of the framework – are then shaped by individual preferences and sociocultural demands, such as an adolescent female accepting her own body, reaching independence in the home, or starting an intimate relationship.
- The second phase of this framework involves ‘knowledge’ and ‘expectations’ that are driven significantly by sociocultural demands. Within this phase, adolescents are aware of factors influencing the way they should conform in society. ‘Knowledge’ and ‘expectations’ impact the evaluations that adolescents make regarding their emotional and cognitive competence.
- The third phase is known as ‘timing’ and ‘gender roles’. ‘Timing’ of normative development tasks refers to a specific point in which an individual should begin and finish a task, for example, an adolescent completing primary and secondary school. ‘Gender roles’ refer to traits and practices which a male or female should abide by. For an older adolescent female, this may include dressing ‘femininely’, using particular language and acting sensitively and with maturity (Berger et al., 1991; Markson, 2004).
- With accurate completion of ‘timing’ and ‘gender roles’, one is then able to reach the last phase and objective of ‘normative development tasks’. Those who

do not successfully meet normative development tasks may be burdened by decreased self-worth, self-esteem and self-identity. However, those who meet expected developmental tasks are more likely to be resilient individuals with increased emotional wellbeing and self-worth (Bergen et al., 1991).

### **2.3.2 Social, peer and media influences on femininity and self-identity**

Throughout puberty and development shifts, adolescent females are exposed to a myriad of messages, images and norms. From this, they must determine what it means to be feminine (Markson, 2004). Constantly, female adolescents are exposed to information regarding gender roles from dominant industries that produce magazines, television and music. These industries exhibit behaviour, appearance standards, fashion, language, values and specific body types that influence ways of being feminine (Markson, 2004; Horn et al., 2011). Although these industries are not entirely responsible for the cultural norms associated with female gender identity, they contribute significantly to female gender constructions within our society (Markson, 2004). Adolescence is a time when individuals search for self-identity and self-worth. In doing so, being accepted and becoming a part of a social group is important. Because an adolescent's self-identity is still developing, individuals may draw upon current trends, physical similarities and fitting attitudes as a way to become a social group member (Read, 2011). External forces such as media, music and celebrities often underpin a person's connection to a social group. Thus, high expectations are placed on adolescents to be 'normative' by following fashion trends, appropriate behaviour, attitudes and language (Read, 2011; Markson, 2004).

A study by Read (2011) investigated adolescent females and their considered role models. Celebrities were chosen as dominant role models and were often looked up to due to being '...pretty, nice, beautiful, rich, popular, good at dancing and cool' (Read, 2011, p. 3), demonstrating the value attached to physical appearance, social status and skills by adolescent females. Adolescents who followed media trends and values were often accepted into high social status groups. Alternatively, those who struggled to meet normative demands were placed in lower social status groups. In

order to avoid such an outcome, one participant noted the need to be 'pretty, popular and nice'.

The appeal of being 'celebrity like' was highlighted in the research (Read, 2011, p. 4). The purpose of this was to gain social acceptance, and in turn, self-worth and self-esteem. It was noted that many individuals went to lengthy efforts to fit with feminine norms, such as choosing outfits and perfecting hairstyles (Read, 2004). Two consequences have been noted regarding these types of pressures on young women. First, many female adolescents have fear of not attaining social belonging. In turn, they act in ways that do not represent their own individuality and uniqueness. These adolescents censor their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours so they can fulfil the expectations of others (Markson, 2004; Horn et al., 2011). Such censoring of the self may lead to patterns of silence that prevent young women from 'knowing' the self, consequently impeding on the development of a 'multi-dimensional self' and affecting mental and emotional wellbeing negatively (Markson, 2004). A loss of 'voice' and compliance with gender norms may lead female adolescents to feel undervalued and suppressed with detrimental effects on self-identity (Markson, 2004; Read, 2011). Second, socio-economic status was shown to have direct influences over popularity and social group acceptance. Those individuals who had access to 'stylish' and 'fashionable' clothes and makeup were able to meet gender norms and peer expectations. These adolescents reported increased feelings of self-worth, self-esteem and confidence levels (Read, 2011). Those with lower socio-economic status often found difficulty in meeting these normative demands and were often placed in lower social status groups (Read, 2011; Markson, 2004).

### **2.3.3 Feminine body image and influences on adolescent emotional wellbeing**

Negative perceptions of body image are common in adolescent females. Collins et al. (2012) highlight that female adolescents internalise unrealistic and conflicting expectations of being young woman. Moreover, there is an over-emphasis on physical perfection even in young female age groups. It is also argued that young women today aim to make their body, including their heterosexual attractiveness,

shape, hair and clothes, into their central 'project' of self-identity and self-definition. In a study by Paxton, Norris, Wertheim, Durkin and Anderson (2005), it was noted that girls endorse beliefs that being thin is important in determining a girl's popularity with boys, attractiveness and dating success. In the same study, adolescent boys reported that thinness predicted a girl's perceived dating potential and attractiveness. Various studies also report the intrusion of beauty and fashion industries in the lives of young girls and women (Collins, Lidinsky, Rusnock & Torstrick, 2012; Soley-Beltran, 2004). These ideas and messages are often circulated and reinforced in both female and male social groups, influencing normative expectations and behaviours of young women (Soley-Beltran, 2004). Moreover, Collins et al. (2012) note an increasing proportion of young women who are left alone with their peers to cope with the messages they receive from mass media, which define females' self-worth in terms of their appearance.

The effects of body image expectations for young women are various. First, mass media has shown to have destructive consequences as it has increased the sexual objectification of young women. This sexualisation has resulted in various negative effects for women in the domains of physical and mental health, cognitive functioning, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs. Women are also more likely to sexualize themselves in order to fit with these social norms, which is suggested to negatively affect female identity development. Second, females are more likely than boys to develop and invest in negative body image. In doing so, girls are at risk of poor self-esteem, poor self-worth, depression and eating disorders (Collins et al., 2012). Third, imagery involved in media, literature and advertising emphasises unrealistic versions of female bodies that promote physical perfection and thinness. Women often internalise these messages as well as make unfavourable comparisons between an idealised unrealistic form and their own bodies. This commonly results in women having negative views of the self and lowered levels of self-esteem (Collins et al., 2012).

Secondary schools play an important role in maintaining and developing students' self-esteem and mitigating the effects of negative body image. During high school



experiences, adolescents evolve in a context where they learn about themselves both implicitly and explicitly, while encountering major physical, emotional, social and cognitive changes (Morin, Maiano, Marsh & Nagengast, 2013). Schools need to be aware of the factors influencing student self-esteem and the messages students receive about their self-worth inside and outside of the school. It is therefore important for schools to be aware of the influence of mass media on body image, female adolescents' investment in body image perfection and the unrealistic body imagery involved in literature and advertisements (Zeigler-Hill, 2013; Collins et al., 2012). Schools may help develop more positive perceptions of body image by providing students with realistic images of female bodies in school textbooks, and the patterns used for soft material classes, for example. Schools can also look to include content portraying realistic and positive female role models. For example, careful consideration may be taken in the choice of films and texts selected in English and media studies (Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

#### **2.4 The school environment, femininity and emotional wellbeing**

Adolescents spend a large proportion of their waking hours at school. Schools are places where individuals are influenced by 'normative' ways of thinking and behaving. School culture, teacher instruction and expectations, classroom environments, peer dynamics, extracurricular involvement and parental input comprise the various influences that shape, construct and develop adolescents' sense of place, abilities, thinking, attitudes and behaviour (Carroll-Lind, 2009). School principles, missions, values and rules work to inculcate individuals into idealised ways of being. Alongside this, a teacher's teaching philosophy determines the values, lessons and principles held within the classroom (McGee & Fraser, 2008). As a whole therefore, the school environment can exert considerable influence on gender formation and gender relationships, constructing gender-related behaviour and norms (Clelland, 2011; McBride, 2011) that contribute to an adolescent's understanding of femininity and their development of self-identity (Read, 2011).

School is also a common place in which bullying occurs (Carroll-Lind, 2009), the social and emotional impacts of which have been shown to be significant. It is

suggested that the construction, regulation and normalisation of particular forms of femininity (and masculinity) in school culture might perpetuate school bullying (Keddie, 2006, cited in Clelland, 2011) as well as gender and sex-based discrimination (Carroll-Lind, 2009). A gender equity approach (i.e. the promotion of equal relationships between girls and boys, analysis of social interactions and inequitable power relations) has been identified as needed in schools, so that the emotional wellbeing and educational achievement of all students might be enhanced (Wright, 2008; Clelland, 2011). When schools provide both female and male students with equal opportunities and eliminate gender bias and gender typical expectations, student interest and achievement may flourish, increasing levels of emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, allowing students to have a range of experiences permits individuals to breach 'normative' ways of being. Being a part of a 'non-normative' environment gives students the opportunity to enact femininity in multiple ways. These practices are shown to positively affect the way in which adolescents construct their own gender and self-identity. Through this, students may justify, experience and deconstruct ways of being, which may lead to more authentic self-worth and self-identity.

#### **2.4.1 School health education and emotional wellbeing**

Within the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC), health and physical education is one of the eight learning areas. Some objectives of this area are to develop understandings, skills and attitudes needed to maintain and enhance wellbeing, develop resilience, create a sense of personal and social responsibility, develop competencies for mental wellness and strengthen personal identity and self-worth (Ministry of Education, 2007). Mental and emotional wellbeing is shown to be particularly important in health education. Often threaded throughout teaching and learning, key competencies are used to enhance the emotional skills and capacities of students. 'Managing self', 'relating to others' and 'participating and contributing' are competencies that develop and enhance a student's strategies for meeting challenges, their ability to listen effectively and share ideas and their sense of belonging and confidence to participate. These key competencies support positive learning environments as well as the interaction of teachers and students (Ministry

of Education, 2007). However, for the objectives of health education to be successful, an educator must fully understand sociocultural influences on adolescents. They must understand determinants of adolescent emotional wellbeing in order to promote, teach and instil resilience, skills and knowledge in their pupils. Students too must find relevance in their health education and know that their lessons are developed and structured from evidence-based teacher informed knowledge (McGee & Fraser, 2008).

Schools hold an important role in supporting the mental and emotional wellbeing of their students (Ministry of Education, 2007). Health education is one way in which schools can facilitate and support this. It is evident however that compulsory health education only exists up until the end of a student's tenth year at school – unless students opt to take the subject in their final senior years (Cushman, 2008).

Researchers have expressed some concern at this, as senior students are not receiving the health education that supports the changes and challenges typical of late adolescent years (Fenton, 2012; Collin et al., 2012). It is suggested that senior students have different experiences, pressures and needs than students in younger adolescent age groups. Moreover, females report lower levels of self-esteem than males in late adolescence (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Thus, senior students need access to health education that is relevant and realistic to their lives and experiences. Health education that targets senior students' physical, cognitive and social changes will be beneficial to enhancing positive and healthy relationships, understandings of self-identity and general emotional wellbeing (Collins et al., 2012). Furthermore, adolescent emotional wellbeing is more likely to flourish if health education supports healthy behaviour and decision making and allows students to be fully informed on topics that are relevant and realistic to their lives (Fenton, 2012).

#### **2.4.2 Health education reducing negative stigma of mental and emotional health**

Negative stigma surrounding mental and emotional health is known to hinder student access to mental health support services in schools. The stigma associated with mental health has resulted in students feeling weak and embarrassed when a mental health service is used, has impaired students' identification of when they

may need mental and emotional health support and has restricted understandings of where students should go to if they need support (Bowers, Manion, Papadopoulos & Gauvreau, 2013). Schools however, should be places where students and teachers feel comfortable to seek mental and emotional information and support services. Mental health should not be viewed negatively, and all schools should promote and support mental health (Lee, 2009; Macklem, 2011). Health education is thought to be a way to facilitate this. Health education may educate students and enhance more positive and healthy views of mental health and support services (Lee, 2009). This is important, as research has shown a decrease in stigmatised views when students have more knowledge of mental health (Bowers et al., 2013).

Health education and positively enhancing a school's mental health culture is important for various reasons. First, young people are susceptible to stigma and are less likely to access mental health support services when they are concerned with peer acceptance and peer interaction at school. Second, the rate of unmet mental health needs is precariously high. In a United States study, 70% of adolescents who have a mental health need do not gain access to mental health services, and stigma is suggested to be the most common reason for this (Bowers et al., 2013). Lastly, many consequences of unmet mental health needs are apparent. Students who struggle emotionally are unable to learn or thrive to their potential. Thus, addressing the emotional health of students is a prerequisite for learning and achievement (Macklem, 2011). The most severe consequence is suicide. Approximately 90% of those adolescents who commit suicide in the US have had unmet mental health needs (Bowers et al., 2013). Worryingly, despite the success of a number of mental health programmes, young people are still reluctant to access mental health services (Macklem, 2011). Thus, health education may contribute towards a much needed culture change, by positively re-framing mental health and school support services.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and research design employed in this study. It will detail the theoretical framework, how participants were selected and recruited, the ways in which data was collected and analysed, and the relevant ethical issues.

#### 3.1 Theoretical framework

The aim of this research was to investigate how female adolescent emotional wellbeing is influenced by constructions of femininity in the school environment. To understand these determinants, a qualitative methodological approach with interpretive and social constructivist underpinnings was used to reveal constructed meanings and the lived realities of research participants (Mutch, 2005). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research is concerned with seeking understandings of participants' feelings, behaviours and emotions. It allows a researcher to explore a phenomenon from participant perspectives through a wide range of settings and a variety of forms. Researchers therefore engage in contexts in which participants live, utilising exploratory questions to gather descriptive detail about a person or group.

As people's lives are unique and diverse, it was important for this research to encapsulate and report multiple perspectives rather than seeking a single truth (Patton, 2001, p. 546). Accordingly, an interpretivist approach was used. Interpretive studies assume that participants associate and create their own meanings as they interact and experience the world around them. Thus, interpretivist researchers attempt to build understanding of phenomena by accessing the meaning that participants assign to themselves (Black, 2006), and that which is shared in terms of consciousness and language (Rowlands, 2005). An interpretivist researcher therefore must acknowledge the relationship between themselves and what is being explored as well as the situational context shaping the process.

Interpretivism is underpinned by the belief that knowledge is socially constructed and is influenced by history, experiences, values, culture, politics, beliefs and power differences (Miles & Gilbert, 2005; Rowlands, 2005). Consequently, interpretivism is closely aligned with social constructivism. Social constructivism emphasises the importance of culture and context in being able to understand how society is shaped and how it operates (Fox, 2011). Social constructivism allows a researcher to use a lens that views participants' learning and interactions as a product from the culture and context in which they live (Derry, 1999). Lev Vygotsky is credited with developing the foundation of social constructivism as he proposed that learning is socially mediated through a culture of symbols and language that are constructed through interactions with others in that culture (Derry, 1999). Vygotsky also believed that it was impossible to separate learning from its social context. Thus, the social environment in which a person is in has direct influence over the understandings that a person generates. Alongside this, Vygotsky asserted that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition, for example, through talk, activities, sharing problems and watching others in the environment (Fox, 2011). Furthermore, individual development derives from social interactions within which cultural meanings are shared by the group and internalised by the individual (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997).

A social constructivist researcher takes note of the ways that individuals generate understandings based on the interactions they have with their social environment. In using a social constructivist lens within this research, it is noted that a number of different institutions help mould adolescent roles and beliefs, such as the family, school, church or sporting environment (Fox, 2011). Alongside this, identity is considered a social construct, such as race, gender and sexuality. Through the environments individuals associate with, individuals are socialised into understandings of what constitutes man, woman, black, white, gay or heterosexual (Fox, 2011). Finally, it is suggested that people maintain their socially constructed worlds by identifying with certain people, objects and places that best fit their subjective and socially constructed reality. Individuals therefore seek out aspects that confirm their beliefs, values and norms (Fox, 2011; Derry, 1999). Social

constructivism provides this research with a critical and purposeful lens, allowing investigation into why and how adolescents make sense of their emotional wellbeing and gender identity.

### **3.2 Data collection methods**

It is important in interpretivist research that data collection methods provide opportunities for participants to describe their experiences. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups fit this purpose.

- **Audio-taped, semi-structured individual interviews**

An interview is a purposeful conversation conducted between two or more people (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews are designed to question and interpret the meaning of experience, allowing the researcher to access the context and meaning of people's lives. In using an interpretivist methodology, Dilley (2004) highlights interviewing as being situational and conditional. As the selected participants come from a variety of backgrounds, interviewing allows a researcher to understand the lives of participants through questioning, prompting and discussion. The purpose of interviews in relation to the proposed research questions allowed this research to delve into the lives of adolescent females by investigating their perspectives, understandings, social influences and perceptions.

Each participant was asked to participate in a thirty-minute individual interview. There were six individual interviews in total, which included four with students and two with teachers. Each of these interviews were semi-structured with the purpose of allowing the researcher to choose the direction of questions based on the responses given by the individual (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through this, I was able to encourage the participants to talk while delving more deeply into the issues and topics they initiated. These individual interviews were held prior to focus group interviews. Individual interviews also prompted possible follow-up focus group questions and topics (see Appendix Four).

- **Audiotaped, semi-structured focus groups**

Focus groups have a similar purpose to individual interviews, as they are used to generate social data about a participant's world through conversation (Harris, 2009). Semi-structured focus groups often have pre-set questions while allowing for negotiation of responses (Mutch, 2005). The purpose in using this tool was to allow an understanding of the perceptions, ideas and experiences of a range of participants. These focus groups were structured to foster talk *among* the participants (see Appendix Four). Focus groups are able to open up unique ideas and insights which may not be possible in individual interviews (Harris, 2009). Rich data may emerge where understandings are contested, elaborated on and analysed through differing participant perspectives. Understandings of emotional wellbeing, self-identity and gender were discussed openly, with each participant adding their own perspective to the discussed topic.

One focus group (1 hour in duration) was conducted with all participating students. The focus group developed ideas from the individual interviews and sought to understand multiple perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). While focus groups offer many advantages, it was important to realise some potential limitations associated with this data-gathering tool. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that some group members may talk too much and may overpower the interview. Also, some participants may feel uncomfortable sharing ideas in front of other people, therefore inhibiting new perspectives and ideas. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of individual interviews and focus groups, this justifies the use of both tools. The combination of individual interviews and focus group yielded a greater volume of data, but most importantly allowed deeper exploration of key ideas in a group context and the observation of social dynamics. Special consideration was taken in the focus group to ensure the active participation of all members.

Both individual interviews and the focus group interview needed to take place in environments that were emotionally and physically safe and comfortable for the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The timing of student individual interviews was scheduled over the school holiday period. In being unable to utilise



school facilities during this time, student interviews were held in the library discussion rooms at the University of Canterbury. This site was chosen and agreed on by all participants and myself as it provided an interview space that was easily accessible, safe and comfortable. The focus group interview and individual teacher interviews were conducted on site at the school, in a room that was not accessed by other students. The school was a venue that allowed students and teachers to feel relaxed in a quiet, non-intrusive environment familiar to them (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to participants to read and verify. The time schedule of individual interviews and the focus group was negotiated with all participants. This was to ensure the research project was not obtrusive or obstructive to participants' other commitments.

### **3.3 Selection of participants**

Year 13 (sometimes referred to as seventh form) girls are generally either 17 or 18 years old. This age group was chosen as the focus of this study as literature demonstrates a variety of influences on their emotional wellbeing, self-identity and self-worth (Patterson, 2012), as well as a need for further research in this area (Horn et al., 2011). It is important to note here that the influences that shape older adolescent female emotional wellbeing are different from those experienced in younger age groups. Moreover, exploring gender identity in the course of self-development prior to entering adulthood is a central focus for this age group (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Because emotional wellbeing and femininity are influenced by sociocultural expectations, studying this age group also offered valuable insight.

Literature has shown the school environment as a place in which students are influenced by a range of sociocultural practices involving attitudes, beliefs and expectations from peers, teachers and parents (Carroll-Lind, 2009; Read, 2011). Because this research is concerned with investigating these influences, the school environment was chosen as a place to conduct this study. From one high school, four students were asked to participate. Two teachers were also interviewed about their perceptions of femininity construction and student emotional wellbeing,

recognising their role within the school environment with respect to both of these aspects. A small number of participants were interviewed in order to extract deep, thick and detailed data (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007).

The school and participants were both selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is when a researcher chooses particular participants to include in the research because they are believed to ‘...facilitate the expansion of the developing theory’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73). This method allows a researcher to select participants that will best inform the research questions and enhance understandings of the phenomenon under study (Mutch, 2005). The chosen school environment was a single-sex, semi-private, decile-nine secondary school. A single-sex school had been chosen, as it is a place where femininity constructions circulate and flourish. This environment was worth investigating as it purposely shapes individuals to meet gender-specific norms (Bhana & Pillay, 2011). The chosen school offered a broad range of female adolescents and teachers with differing socio-economic status and cultural backgrounds.

Before entering the school, a meeting was set up with the school principal and deputy principal. In this meeting, all aspects of the research were described including who I was as a student researcher, the purpose of the research, ethical considerations and what was being asked of the school and participants. Once the school principal had granted permission for this research to be conducted in the school, the deputy principal identified a variety of students and teachers who were willing to participate. Purposive sampling was used here as the deputy principal selected students with a range of backgrounds and experiences and chose those who were likely to feel comfortable in sharing their ideas. I then met with the participants at a time that suited them to explain the research and their potential role in the project, should they consent to being involved. Information sheets and consent forms were given to all participants and student participants’ parents (see Appendix One and Two). Those participants that were willing to participate met with me again and consent forms were gathered.

### **3.3.1 Participant socio-demographics**

Participant information is outlined below, with the associated pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants, in line with ethical considerations.

- **Student participants**

Student 01: At the time of the research Student 01 was a 17-year-old student in Year 13 and had been at the school since Year Nine. Student 01 is the eldest child in a Catholic family. Both of her parents work full time. Student 01's family includes a mother, father, younger brother and a younger sister.

Student 02: Student 02 was a 17-year-old student in Year 13 and had been at the school since Year Nine. Student 02 is the eldest child and has three younger sisters. She also lives with her mother and father. Student 02's dad works away from home from Monday to Friday and Student 02 and her family see him when he returns home in the weekends. Student 02's mother works part-time and relies on Student 02 to help run the household during the week. Student 02 has had a Catholic upbringing and identifies with being Catholic.

Student 03: Student 03 was a 17-year-old student in Year 13 and had been at the school since Year Nine. Student 03 is an only child and lives with her mother and father. Student 03's parents both work full time in male-dominated fields. Student 03 does not identify with being Catholic but has had a Catholic upbringing since primary school.

Student 04: Student 04 was a 17-year-old student and had been at the school since Year 10. Student 04 has a younger brother and a younger sister. Student 04 lives only with her mother as her father passed away when she was in Year 11. Student 04's mother works full time and her brother attends a boarding school. Student 04 is not religious and was first exposed to Catholicism upon her arrival at this school.

- **Teacher participants**

Teacher 01: Teacher 01 is a soft materials teacher at the school and had been teaching there for six years. Teacher 01 has had teaching experience overseas and came to New Zealand eight years ago to continue her teaching career and have a family. She is not religious and had only taught in co-educational contexts prior to her role in this current position. Teacher 01 also holds a management position as head of a house within the school.

Teacher 02: Teacher 02 is a guidance counsellor at the school. Teacher 02 is very experienced in her role and has held this position in a number of schools, including being a counsellor in another single-sex girl's high school. Teacher 02 is Catholic and works full-time at the school.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Mutch (2005) suggested there might be a high level of risk when a researcher engages with the emotional wellbeing of young people. Risks may include the power imbalance influencing participants' discussion and disclosure, parents' interpretations of the study's findings, confidence being damaged due to the researcher or other participants' opinions, personal issues being explored, embarrassment and participants feeling uncomfortable in sharing opinions or ideas. It was therefore crucial that I as a researcher worked to eliminate and minimise potential threats to participants. Identifying risk was important in ensuring the safety of participants as well as the legitimacy of gathered data (Keddie, 2004). Throughout the process of data collection, I committed to behaving in ethically correct ways. The following ethical principles underpinned the design of my research as I aimed to look after the safety of the participants.

- **Informed consent**

Before starting the project, I gained ethical approval from the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee for my approach, methods and study information/materials. Upon receiving approval, I then approached the school and requested to meet with the principal. The principal then

gave written consent for the project to take place in the school. Everybody who was a part of the research was given a full explanation regarding the purpose and details of the research. This included the principal, deputy principal and all participants. All participants and their caregivers were provided with information detailing every aspect of the research project. Consent forms from all participants and participants' parents were also gathered before starting the research. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and participants had time to look over the interview questions before starting and recording the interview. Participants were all asked at our second meeting and again before starting the interviews whether they still wanted to participate.

- **Confidentiality and data storage**

All participants in the study were informed that all information relating to them would be kept confidential to the researcher, the project supervisors and, in the case of focus group participation, the other participants within the study. No personal names were used in this research. Instead, student participants were labelled as 'Student 01' and 'Student 02' and so on. Teacher participants were also labelled as 'Teacher 01' and 'Teacher 02'. It was highlighted to all participants that the data would be stored at the University in a locked cabinet in a locked room. This data is to be kept only for five years and then destroyed afterwards. Every student was informed of group discussion protocols in order to keep confidentiality within the group. The participants agreed to keep what was shared in confidence. Before conducting the focus group, participants were again reminded of this.

- **Safety of participants**

There are potential risks when a researcher engages with the emotional wellbeing of young people. Harm may occur to participants if they disclose information that affects their wellbeing (Clelland, 2011). As Eisner and Peshkin (1990) suggests, the researcher should possess/exhibit two attributes. The first includes sensitivity towards participants and the research, while having the ability to identify any ethical issues. Second, a researcher should have the responsibility to act accordingly and appropriately in regards to any ethical issues. In recognition of this, I mitigated any

risks to participants' wellbeing by discussing protocols with the deputy principal of the school and the school's guidance counsellor. The school counsellor was a part of the research but was not informed of the names of students participating. The student participants were also briefed on whom they should go to if they had any concerns or problems with the research, namely the Deputy Principal or the guidance counsellor. In having adolescent females as participants, I was also wary of participants sharing their contribution and involvement in the research. I therefore reminded the students of the protocols and guidelines as part of the research and reminded them to keep what they shared and heard from other participants in confidence.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

Once the data was collected, I transcribed the individual interview and focus group audiotape recordings. The transcripts were sent to all participants for verification. Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken. This enabled categories and themes to be taken from the data as they emerged. Thematic analysis involves 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), a theme '...captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.' Transcribing and thematic analysis proved to be time consuming, but allows for a researcher to engage deeply with the data.

This process of thematic analysis was underpinned by guidelines developed by Mutch (2005) for qualitative researchers. The process began with approaching the data with an open mind. I read over the data various times and coded using different coloured highlighters. I read over the data again multiple times, recoding themes and identifying common words, repeated concepts and anything of interest. In doing this, I created a coloured key that associated a colour with an identified pattern or concept. I then determined loose categories and found concepts and patterns that related to each other and between data sets. I met with my supervisors and discussed the themes that were apparent. In doing so, we discussed

important themes and themes that were stronger than others. After sharing my analysis, I further continued to finalise my main themes, determining whether they were consistent. It was also important to consider whether the themes resonated with other research and literature. The main themes in the analysis are described in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### Results

#### 4.1 School curriculum areas stereotype and restrict students' interests and choices

It is noted that the participants receive explicit messages about femininity from the school, through curriculum areas, classroom teachers, religious education and general school expectations. Participants have detailed their experiences of school curriculum areas. Within these curriculum areas, participants feel their femininity is constructed through gender-specific subjects. Classes of cooking and sewing are offered in this single-sex environment and is described by a participant in the focus group as *'making it normal that these classes are only for girls and women'* (Student 03). Similar to this, a teacher participant explained the limited choice of subjects that these students have, which in turn continues normative gender stereotypes. For example, *'I think we are a very feminine school. We still fit the mould that the only technology subjects we offer are sewing and cooking. We are almost pigeonholing women that that is all they want to do'* (Teacher 01).

Although the school stands steadfast in a long tradition of gender specific subject areas, the school is looking to develop a wider selection of subjects for students. For example, one teacher participant states, *'we are looking into economics and business; we are introducing those sides of the curriculum, which I think is really important'* (Teacher 01). Students have also exhibited their interest in a broader range of subjects, highlighting the need for more educational opportunities. One participant in an individual interview stated, *'we've always had cooking and sewing as being a part of a girls school, but I think in the next year the school is looking at allowing students to expand their technology subjects to woodwork and other hard materials. I think that will be important so we have more choice'* (Student 02). Moreover, another participant stated, *'That's why the timetable is changing so people who want to do these materials can go offsite and work with Riccarton or St Thomas'. So yeah, that's really cool in making sure that we can get as many*



*opportunities as we can which won't limit us because we are women'* (Student 03). It is evident here the students have noticed importance in expanding subject areas, allowing them as women to seek different types of technology subjects. This seems to be important, as participants have noted that their already existent technology subjects of sewing and cooking are restrictive to their gender. It is understood however that these participants are interested in breaking this mould by moving outside of gender stereotypes, to instead be a part of subjects that are of interest to them.

All participants thought that the curriculum areas of sewing and cooking were typical of female schools and their gender role expectations. Interestingly however, the participants' decisiveness was apparent in deciding upon their own future gender roles. All participants explained that although these gender roles may be expected of them, their own future lifestyles and commitments would dictate whether the man or woman in the household completes these jobs, rather than it being based on gender role expectations. For example in an individual interview, a participant describes women as, *'having their own strengths, different from a man, but not less than a man and that each person should contribute together'* (Student 02). Another participant entails her role as, *'a woman that works alongside a man with an equal share of responsibilities'* (Student 04). In questioning participants about their role as a woman, based on gender norms established within school, one response was:

*'I don't want it to be like, just because I'm a woman that I am going to be doing those jobs. Because I'm a mum and I care for my kids I might end up doing those jobs. But because of circumstances... Like it's circumstances that mean that mum has to cook. Like if dad's home, either mum or dad cooks, it just depends on who's home. Its not about you are the women you are going to cook, or you are the man, you have to work. Because my mum still works and stuff.'* (Student 02)

#### 4.2 Mixed messages between future ambition and religious expectations

Religious education plays a large part in this single-sex high school. It influences the girls' understandings of femininity through bible teachings, the overall religious character of the school and its traditional expectations of being a woman. All participants in this study detailed their thoughts in regards to how the school's religious content affects their understandings of femininity. Although the students hold Catholicism in a high regard, student and teacher participants often thought that the religious teachings contradicted with the realistic expectations of day-to-day teenage lives. As mentioned previously, the girls within this high school have established themselves as young women of opportunity, competence, respect and of high academic and personal standards. The girls have positioned themselves as individuals who are pushed both personally and by their school to achieve their goals and pursue their ambitions. Although the participants recognise their potential as young women, they have spoken of religious education as being a limiting factor to future personal ambition. Simply put, the religious expectations of the school conflict with the girls' desire to be independent, career-driven young women. In reference to the individual interviews, one participant said, *'Like we've always been taught that we will get married and have babies and live at home for a while and then have a career after'* (Student 01). Another participant added, *'we are taught to save ourselves for marriage'* (Student 04). The confusion of the girls is evident. Students are taught to *'gain high academic results'* (Student 02) and *'...study hard to get the job we want'* (Student 04). However, religious influences teach students to work towards having a family, staying at home and caring for the children. An example of one individual interview detailed a participant's understanding of this confusion:

*I: What about the classroom? Are there any femininity messages you receive there?*

*S03: Hmmm I hear that Catholics have a place here and should be this and this. Mrs Smith goes, 'all of you girls are going to grow up and be great wives and mothers and things like that. That's it. Wives and mothers.'*

*I: What do you understand from that?*

*S03: Its like, I'm doing all of this to have a great future and then all I'm going to do is be a great wife and mother?*

*I: Do the academic and 'successful women' messages from school contradict with messages from religious ed.?*

*S03: Yeah it's like you need to do this and have a full time job, but also be a mother and go home and cook dinner for your family. That's kind of what you get sometimes. Its like, you're going to go on and do great things and go to New York if you want to... but then find a man and settle down and have some kids. That's what you get.*

Teacher participants held similar views to that of student participants. One teacher in particular identified the school's religious and traditional stance. This was thought to impact negatively on students' understandings of being a young woman. In asking one teacher of her thoughts on femininity understandings in this religious school, her response was, *'I think the school encourages them to be a 1920s housewife. I don't want that to come across as derogatory but that's just the way the school is'* (Teacher 01). The teacher went on to explain, *'...Even the Catholic church, it's all males at the top and so it's interesting where they see women's place in society and that feeds into many of the girls' and teachers' faith here'* (Teacher 01). This statement outlines the idea of teaching girls to be traditional in their role through fulfilling motherhood, staying at home, and looking after children, thus placing one's personal career second. Although the views of the Catholic Church are a part of the girls' lives at this school, the students regard religion as an important aspect of their lives and development. For example, one student participant stated, *'I'm not Catholic and being at this school and learning about the religious side gave me a new perspective. That gave me more confidence to see how God can help you through and there is always someone else looking after you'* (Student 04).

### 4.3 Teachers model female independence, strength and self-respect

The girls are witnesses to *'strong independent female teachers'* (Student 02). The participants gave many examples of teachers they admired and teachers who they thought represented women well. The student participants exhibited their desire for being independent, intelligent, capable women with leadership abilities and respected personalities. Three teachers in the school were talked about commonly between the participants in the focus group. These teachers were role models for the participants through their way of teaching, things that they have said, the values they exhibit to the students and their role in the school. In questioning the participants about the values they think their teachers try to instill in them, some responses in the focus group included, *'to be strong and capable. And to realise our potential. She is a woman and she is a very different woman because she's so tall and she had this power'* (Student 03). Another student commented about the same teacher: *'She had this mannerism about her that oozed authority. She had a very authoritative stance and she was in a high position in the school. She was a part of the leadership team in the school. And I think at that time she was the only woman, [apart] from the Principal'* (Student 02). One participant detailed her thoughts on teacher values and how that has established her understandings of femininity: *'...Femininity would all be about making sure the girls they are teaching know that they are not limited by the fact that they are women and what they are getting taught. And trying to get them to understand that they have to be respectful and kind and honest... All the good things that a human should be, that we want humanity to be'* (Student 02). Another student furthered this conversation: *'But also that they are not any less important than the men that they will be surrounded by when they move into the big wide world. And that as a teacher you need to inspire them to realise that kind of potential they have within themselves and the greatness they have so they can go on and further their education or further what they want to do in life'* (Student 03).

Participants within the student focus group identified respect, strength and resilience as features of femininity. Participants highlighted this as something they want themselves to be, as well as being values their teachers work to instill in them.

A participant noted, *'Like the job description is to go out there, be strong, be capable and show your true colours and be who you are. And be resilient when you get kicked down a couple of times because you've got to stand back up again to be strong again'* (Student 03). Respect was a value discussed heavily during individual interviews and the focus group. All participants noted this as being important to their womanhood. *'Respect and honesty go hand in hand I think. If you are honest and respectful, you should theoretically do better in life. And I would be very disappointed in myself if I looked back and I got successful through disrespectful and dishonest methods. Not only as a woman, but also as a person in general. That would be very upsetting. But especially as a woman'* (Student 02). From these quotes it may be suggested that the participants understand femininity as involving leadership qualities, being independent, reaching one's own personal potential and not allowing gender factors to hinder their opportunities. The teachers exhibit these behaviours and it is evident that the students respond to this with reverence and admiration.

#### **4.4 'Girl code' provides stringent rules for peer group and individual behaviour**

Understandings of femininity are established among peer groups. Each member of a peer group is exposed to certain ways of behaving and dressing, often based on the notion of 'girl code'. Adhering to *'girl code'* (Student 03) allows students to fit into social norms, allowing them to be accepted and deemed *'cool'* (Student 03). Many of the participants spoke of body image as being central to their femininity. In regards to mufti days at school, this is a time where participants feel pressured to wear fashionable items. They are expected to look a certain way, including having done their hair and makeup to 'girl code' standard. One participant speaks of her challenge in ensuring she wears the right outfit. Her peers pressure her to conform to this standard. Detailing a text she received from a peer the morning of the focus group, she said, *'I always get texts in the morning being like 'what are you wearing, tell me ASAP'* (Student 01). She continued with *'...In Year 10 I came to school wearing jeans and a tee shirt... Someone came up to me and said I don't want you to wear that outfit ever again and ever since then I have always wanted to text round and gauge the situation'* (Student 01). Another participant spoke of the 'girl code'

rules in dressing for a school dance. In this situation the participant wanted to wear pants instead of a dress or a skirt. The participant spoke of this event saying, *'I remember specifically wearing pants for that dance. And they were like 'oh my god you have to wear a skirt or no one's going to dance with you'. They said that if I wear pants, I'd be dyke'* (Student 03). These examples exhibit ways in which young women feel they should dress to meet certain feminine standards. It also suggests that to be feminine, one must relate to 'girl code' by wearing skirts or dresses, otherwise one may be perceived as butch or less feminine.

Participants reported learning about friendships and romantic relationships through peer group interactions. Within this, the girls understand their role as a young woman through the conversations and experiences they have with peers. Often however, these conversations are associated with gossiping, judgment of others and exclusionary practices. Participants also talked about ongoing social pressures. These include expectations of attending parties, drinking alcohol, flirting with young men and dressing in a certain way. At the age of 17 and 18, the participants all had experiences of parties and romantic relationships. In discussion of this topic, they shared experiences about themselves and their friends. As a part of 'girl code', expectations of attending parties included wearing minimal clothing, having hair and makeup done in fashionable ways and drinking alcohol. When a participant was asked the 'rules' of attending parties and the use of girl code, she explained, *'first of all you have to be single'*. Then, *'it's a meat fest and alcohol has a lot to do with it'* (Student 03). This participant continued describing these experiences:

*'Its like you drink and then guys flirt with you and you're just holding a drink all the time and they're like, 'hey' [sweet voice]. And then you start flirting with them. Okay, when my boyfriend and I first started going out, we got invited to a party and we were like you know what, we'll just stay here till ten and then we'll leave at ten, because at ten because everyone will be drunk. And so we sat there, on the couch and on this couch we could see everything. And we just watched everybody get drunker and drunker and the meat fest began and the next thing, people began taking their tops off, sitting in the*

*corner and then other people disappear and then another two over there and then there's more guys with those girls and then next thing you know everybody is hooking up with everybody' (Student 03).*

This participant's experiences have allowed her to understand that there are certain ways of behaving and dressing in order to fulfill social norms at these types of events. It is highlighted here that these young women feel the need to wear minimal clothing, flirt with members of the opposite sex and use alcohol to gain attention from males. These young women seem to objectify themselves in the aim of meeting these social expectations. Another participant was asked to describe why girls acted this way at parties. An example of this conversation is as follows:

*I: Why do girls do this?*

*S03: Because they feel like they need to have experience. They need to know guys I guess.*

*I: So girls are expected to have experience with a guy?*

*S03: Yeah*

*I: Who demands that they must have experience?*

*S03: Each other. They want each other... or girls pressure girls to get with guys.*

*I: And why do girls pressure girls?*

*S03: Guys are everything. They want the attention from guys to make you more popular I guess. Or knowing the popular guys. Like if you go 'oh I hooked up with that guy' and then you talk about how you have a thing now and then everybody knows it. And then you are up in the hierarchy. It's like a video game.*

*I: How do you feel about all of this?*

*S03: I'm just constantly frustrated. Not because I want them to be like me, but because they want me to be like them. They want me to follow all these rules. Like the girl code rules. I don't want to follow them. Like sometimes my friends are more than happy to go along with it. My friend is more than happy to follow the rules, like 'you can wear a dress here and you can only do this here' (Student 03).*

The experiences detailed above demonstrate these young women's understandings of how they should behave, dress and interact at these types of social events. It is evident that although there is pressure from female peers to behave in this way, another and perhaps a more overpowering objective, is to please the male counterpart. Although one participant wanted to go against these social rules, it may be suggested that she felt frustration due to the power these pressures held over her. These social norms and expectations from parties were reinforced, prepared for and discussed during school time. Peer groups often held conversations about the outfits they would wear to the party, how much alcohol they would drink and what boys they wanted to see. Parallel to this, after these social events, participants would debrief about the party, sharing gossip and information about how the party went, who kissed and slept with whom and how much alcohol other people drank. Within the focus group, participants detailed some examples. Student 01 stated: *'yeah, we get ready and stuff and get our nails done'*. Student 01 again continues by saying: *'Mum always says, 'save for uni, save for uni', but I need a new outfit for this party I'm going to as I've already worn my other outfits* (Student 01). Similar to this, Student 02 states: *'there's a party on tonight... but there are lots of pressures'* (Student 02). Student 04 also commented: *'well, you wear less. You show lots of skin. Everyone wants to show lots of skin'*.

Participants also shared examples of conversations that occurred during school after a party had taken place: *'She always gets with these guys who don't respect her at all. She gets with them, goes home with them and the next day is crying and crying about how she makes poor decisions'* (Student 02) and *'we will discuss what went on*



*at a party, like who was hooking up with who, who was doing something they shouldn't have and who was wasted'* (Student 01). Although social events happen outside of the schooling context, the conversations and expectations are set within the school. Conversation is the medium in which social pressures and norms that dictate girls' behaviour and dress are reinforced and perpetuated; i.e. conversations between girls reinforce prevailing femininity discourses. These examples demonstrate participants' lived experiences and how they act, behave, deal with and understand the role of being a young woman, within a peer group setting.

#### **4.5 Students understand their role as a female through family experiences**

All participants spoke of their family and their family's influence over their understandings of femininity. Each participant's family experiences differed significantly from one another. Beginning with Student 02, she detailed her upbringing as an experience that has been largely associated with females: *'...coming from a household of girls, my role is quite important. Because I'm the oldest I have had to look after my siblings. I'm also a leader within my school and all these different things. And I'm a dancer. A lot of my things are where women surround me constantly.'* Student 02's ideas of femininity are represented in the following quote: *'what I do is female, it's always female. We don't have that many men. So therefore women, we have to assume leadership roles, we have to be strong and like smart and everything.'* Similar to Student 02, Student 04 has experienced her household as being dominated by women. Student 04 sees a women's role as one that is proactive and in charge with an equal share of house duties. Student 04 mentions her understanding of femininity is *'influenced by our mothers. We pick up what they do and that makes us who we are.'*

Another participant Student 03 has experienced her mother as being very knowledgeable, strong willed and *'capable of being in a man's world and a women's world'*. In an individual interview, student 03 describes herself and her mother as being less feminine than other women. Student 03 offers an example of her mother's personality. In this situation, Student 03's mother dyed her hair pink. Student 03 explained that her mother did this because she wanted to and dismissed

other people's rules of fashion: *'My mum never follows the rules. She cut lots of her hair off the other day and wanted to dye it pink... She's someone who is confident with it. She rocks it even though she knows it's not right.'* It is evident Student 03 finds her mother's personality and self-confidence important to her own development of femininity. Student 03 concludes by saying: *'I admire her for that.'*

Different from other participants, Student 01 described her upbringing as very traditional. Lucy is from a home with a mother, father, sister and brother. She explains the duties of the house as being separated into women's work and men's work. In speaking about her brother, Student 01 explains, *'Usually occasionally he will go out and mow the lawn. He doesn't do the dishes or cook.'* Although the jobs in the home are separated by gender, Student 01 points out her frustration in this as she thinks, *'I don't see why both girls and guys can't do each other's jobs. My brother could cook and I could mow the lawn.'*

#### **4.6 Students as independent, capable and resilient young women**

Amidst the pressures and expectations participants have experienced, these students have acknowledged who they are as individuals. They demonstrate a desire to be their own person, even though this is often overpowered by dominating forces within the school environment. The following paragraphs will discuss participant self-identity as participants have described it and the expectations and barriers student face. Finally, participant identity confusion will be touched upon, highlighting participants' difficulty in being their own self versus giving into other people's expectations.

Participants have made clear their desire to be independent, capable and intelligent young women. The values participants hold have included self-respect, respect for others, self-confidence and determination. Students hold these values close to them as an important feature in their development of self-identity. This is exemplified in the focus group by a participant who stated: *'...And I would be very disappointed in myself if I looked back and I got successful through disrespectful and dishonest methods. Not only as a woman, but also as a person in general. That would be very*

*upsetting'* (Student 02). This participant also described her ambition in being herself: *'I don't want to forget everything that I've established within myself or my perceptions of the world. I want to keep growing as a human and keep understanding what I can do and my potential'* (Student 02). Another participant highlighted her ambition to be committed to her values by not giving in to peer pressure associated with alcohol and parties. This participant states: *'I'm not going to join you, I'm not going to drink, I'm not going to take 15 shots, I'm just not like that. I'm not that stupid'* (Student 03).

Participants demonstrate resilience in their lives and experiences and appear to value this in their development of self-identity. Student 03 describes the person she aims to be and the importance of being a resilient person. Student 03 states, *'...And be resilient when you get kicked down a couple of times because you've got to stand back up again to be strong again'* (Student 03). In discussion regarding the change of self and how participants' resilience has been developed, two participants share their thoughts: *'In the past I used to get upset about rumours that would go around and would get really upset at people who don't like me. But now I don't give two craps about it when those people don't like me'* (Student 01). Another participant states, *'I have matured more and don't care as much about what other people think'* (Student 04). Participants have detailed their feelings of peer pressure and expectations from other people. Although these pressures are often overpowering, participants still note their desire to be themselves. For example, Student 01 states, *'there are lots of pressures to be cool, but I know I want to be my own person that doesn't care about that type of stuff'* (Student 01).

#### **4.7 Students switch identities for peer, teacher and parent audiences**

Alongside participants' aims to be their own person and uphold the values they deem important, participants' demonstrated confusion in their self-identity. One participant had difficulty in being herself while trying to meet the expectations of peers at school. She explains her difficulty by saying: *'Yeah all of these things have built up... Like people trying to tell me what to be. Then last year I just cracked. I just couldn't do it anymore. And all my grades went down'* (Student 03). In asking

Student 03 what she meant by this statement, she stated, *'I'm just constantly frustrated. Not because I want them to be like me, but because they want me to be like them. They want me to follow these rules, like the girl code rules. I don't want to follow them'* (Student 03). It was apparent also that participants exhibited different personalities around different groups of people. Student 01 explains, *'I'm different when I am around myself compared to when I'm with my friends or my teachers or my family and it's all completely different. It's like I am three different characters'*. Student 01 expands her explanation of this by stating, *'...with my friend group, it's like I have to be this certain person. It's not that they tell me to, but it's their actions and the occasional things they say'* (Student 01). Student 03 had similar experiences to Student 01 saying, *'...I have to be very PC around my group of friends. I have to be very proper. I can't talk stupid talk that you talk with guys. I can't do that with my other friends'* (Student 03). Student 03 also goes on to state her general confusion in understanding her self-identity:

*I get very confused. The last couple of months, and last year I have struggled a lot because I can't work out what I am supposed to do. Am I supposed to be this person who keeps jumping around or do I be myself? And I have wasted a lot of energy changing for people. And by the time I get home again, I'm exhausted and I'm frustrated!* (Student 03)

Although some participants have experienced confusion in their self-identity, it is clear what these participants perceive as important. Participants articulate a desire for future maturity, personal growth, more understanding of their 'self' and their abilities. They appear to desire integrity so that they may resist external pressures and influences. Three examples from individual interviews highlight this desire. First, Student 01 states: *'I think I'll end up being a lot more mature. There won't be so much of the petty budging [trivial peer group pressure and judgement]. I feel I will have grown up a lot more and will say my opinion rather than going with the group'*. Similar to this, Student 04 describes experiences as an important component in developing her sense of self. Student 04 states *'I think what helps with my self-identity is my experiences, like with my dad passing and allowing me to see things in*

*different ways. And like going to Tonga. I am beginning to know who I am'* (Student 04). Finally, Student 02 describes her desire to be self-confident in the future and confident in her thought processes:

*You know what, today is a good day and that is because I'm cool. I'm cool and I can do what I want. And I am intelligent enough to get it. And I have the support around me to get it and it doesn't matter what people think because I am me and that is amazing.* (Student 02)

Finally, it is important to note the impact this research had on participants' lives. In discussion of self-identity and aspects of femininity, participants saw this project as a way to further their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. One participant found herself thinking deeply about all individual interview and focus group questions. In allowing this participant to generate her own thoughts and understandings of femininity, peer relationships, school dynamics and herself, the participant stated: *'I was actually kind of disturbed by my thoughts. Like, what a woman really is. I didn't really know that I thought that way, but I do. My conclusions were exactly how I feel about it. It's just kind of hard to process'* (Student 03). Another participant had similar feelings: *'It's just its so interesting thinking about it. I've never really thought about anything like that before. And actually talking about it has been strange but it's been cool! I never knew I thought about things like that'* (Student 04).

#### **4.8 Inadequate health education, negative body image and peer expectations decrease student self-esteem**

Participants have experienced various causes of low self-esteem. This was made evident in individual interviews and focus group responses. The following paragraphs detail these experiences as well as touch on teacher responses in relation to this issue. With various determinants of low self-esteem, the most common across all interviews included a) school health education not supporting student needs, b) perceptions of negative body image, and c) feelings of needing to

meet other people's expectations. Defence mechanisms or self-protective strategies will also be discussed, as this was evident in students with low self-esteem.

As mentioned previously, students felt their health education had been inadequate in the senior years. In particular, students noted times in which they were unable to manage phases of low self-esteem and strategies to deal with this. Common times in which self-esteem decreased were when participants experienced bullying, social exclusion and academic difficulty. For example, some participants stated, *'I have cried many times because I'm not popular. They don't accept me. They hate my guts and I don't get why'* (Student 03); *'I need to be perfect at this and that or otherwise I won't be the perfect woman... that messes with me quite a bit'* (Student 01). In these cases, self-esteem was affected in two ways. First, participants' self-esteem decreased due to these issues and they often struggled finding ways to understand, monitor and cope with these decreases in self-esteem. Second, because participants found difficulty in dealing appropriately with decreases in self-esteem, their self-esteem sometimes decreased further or remained low for an extended period of time. This was exemplified in participants who stated: *'my self-esteem goes down when these things happen to me, especially at one time'* (Student 01), and in asking participants what happens when they don't know how to deal with their decreases in self-esteem, they replied, *'it just gets worse'* (Student 03) and, *'it stays there for ages unless you do something about it'* (Student 01).

Body image was a common factor that caused low self-esteem, noted by most participants. The school environment was described as one with *'so many pressures to look good'* (Student 01) and a place in which *'lots of people judge'* (Student 04). Pressures to dress fashionably and to be a certain body shape were identified by participants. Student 03 described her experiences regarding this issue, stating: *'Oh my gosh I have had so many weight insecurities just because I'm bigger and I know I'm bigger. But it still gets to me'* (Student 03). Furthermore, this participant found pressure and difficulty in dressing fashionably due to being bigger than other girls. For example, she states, *'It bothers me so much... I can't wear shorts because it doesn't suit my body shape... I love them but I couldn't wear them. It really bothers me when other people can'*. Another participant spoke of her outfit choice and

gaining her friends' fashion approval: *'Like at parties and mufti day I'll get opinions from friends and get a friend to help me decide'* (Student 01). A third participant spoke of the pressures she felt on school mufti day: *'especially on mufti days when everyone is trying to live up to everyone else's standards. And when they know they have, they feel so much better'* (Student 04). Student 04 also specifically states her personal decrease in self-esteem due to body image and peer expectations. She describes her self-esteem during these times by saying: *'I think in a way it lowers it because we're expected to dress in certain ways to live up to other people's standards and that kind of deflates you in a way'*. Student 04 further explains: *'...you feel like if you wear something that you feel uncomfortable in but you wear it so other people go 'she's cool', then that makes you feel worse than you did before'* (Student 04). Further on from this, one teacher participant explained her experiences of student body image in her fabric and design class. She explained:

*S01: It's a hang up that some girls have and you can definitely see it within them. We do a lot of measuring of the body and you can see some of the girls are very concerned about that, even for some of the girls with what you would class as a very, very good figure. It is a perception that they have of themselves.*

*I: Do some of them struggle with that?*

*S01: Some of them do because you can hear them saying 'oh my God I'm not this thin, what's wrong with her leg, look how long her legs are'. You can hear them discussing it. I think in their minds they are thinking whether they should look like that.*

Alongside these pressures, gossip and 'bitching' were associated with judging other students on how they looked. One participant noted, *'Yeah, like there is always the pressure of girls judging you on what they are wearing and everyone always tries to wear their best clothes'* (Student 04). A second participant said, *'and I'd be around friends who would do the same thing and start judging and we all start judging and go 'oh look at what she's wearing'* (Student 01).

Student and teacher interviews reported that students demonstrate defence mechanisms in order to eliminate feelings of low self-esteem. These defence mechanisms were used commonly in situations involving alcohol misuse, body image, and not meeting expected physical presentation and 'girl code' expectations. Beginning with alcohol, participants shared various experiences regarding their own and others' use of alcohol in order to *'come across cool and confident at parties'* (Student 04). All student participants spoke of alcohol as enabling girls to fit into party crowds, talk to young men and to *'hook up with guys'* (Student 01). An identified purpose of this was to eliminate perceived flaws that individuals thought they had. Alcohol thus acted as a protection allowing girls to become 'different people'. To provide an example, one participant spoke of her peer who struggles with body image, low self-esteem and finds it difficult to talk with males. The participant explained: *'she has quite an unusual face and boys don't usually find her that attractive. That has led to her being really lonely.* Furthermore, the participant states, *'that little moment of attention that the boys give her, she thinks it's them liking her, but really it's just them wanting sex because they don't care'* (Student 02). In situations involving alcohol this peer is described as *'acting like another person because of the alcohol'* (Student 02). This peer *'continuously gets drunk, hooks up with guys so she can get the attention and then she feels bad the day after she has done it'* (Student 02).

Two other participants described their own use of self-protective strategies. Student 01 describes her struggle in meeting dress code standards at school on mufti days. In one particular circumstance, this participant felt inadequately dressed to meet the expectations of her peers. Student 01 stated, *'...it is something that is there at the back of your mind. Like I don't go 'uhhh I'm so ugly', but I go, 'do I really look like that all day?'* To compensate for this, Student 01 attends work after school and increases her self-esteem by doing the following: *'...when I get home from school, I'll have a shower and do my makeup as perfect as I can. When I go to work I have my hair and makeup all nice. I'll get compliments at work and then it's fine again.'* Student 03 also exhibited this type of behaviour during school time. For example, a conversation between Student 03 and I went as follows:



*S03: My self-esteem from when I started high school to now has dropped a lot. Particularly with the way we are meant to act or what we are supposed to wear. Like I haven't had a job as I couldn't afford the clothes that I wanted or that the other girls were wearing. I have felt like I was less popular compared to the other girls. I'd try and make it up by doing other things, like playing up with the teachers.*

*I: What about your academic achievement? Did you suffer in relation to that?*

*S03: Yep. I always thought that it would be better to have friends and do funny things and be the clown of the class or text boys than learn.*

*I: Did it affect your self-esteem in any other ways?*

*S03: Yeah, with the overall look I have of myself. Thinking about girls at mufti days and seeing them in better clothes and what they would wear.*

*I: How does that make you feel?*

*S03: Crap.*

*I: Yeah?*

*S03: Yeah, like feeling like you're less than them. But then when you talk to them, the things that they say, they show that they feel less than you.*

*I: So all of the girls are experiencing that?*

*S03: Yeah.*

A teacher participant also commented on students exhibiting defence mechanisms. In relation to the measuring of body size and fitting into garments, this teacher noticed students who became more attention-seeking than those students who

were comfortable with their body shape. The teacher explains: *'Sometimes it's the louder ones who you think would be the most fine about it are actually the most guarded. We usually find that. It's the loud students who are protecting or hiding from something else that's actually quite normal'* (Teacher 01). In contrast, this teacher gives examples of high achieving students with high self-esteem. These students are described by the teacher as being humble and are ones who do not exhibit loud or overpowering qualities. The teacher details two students in particular: *'...they win left, right and centre at nationals and are extremely humble. They have got very good self-esteem. These students are confident in themselves, organised with their time, good at getting their work done and achieve at a high standard'* (Teacher 01). In comparison to this, the teacher explains: *'Whereas we have some people who like to think they are the bees knees, but actually they are not as good as they think they are, and they're the ones you hear all the time'* (Teacher 01).

Adding to this, the teacher has noticed that some students with high self-esteem are often ones who have achieved more than other students during their life. However, although these students exhibit high self-esteem, the teacher notes that they often hold less resilience. She explains:

*I think sometimes the girls with the highest self-esteem are the ones with the lowest resilience. They're the ones that if something goes wrong they can't handle it because they are living on this very high level of achievement and expectation and because they are doing so well. If that scale gets tipped they can't deal with it. They've never dealt with it. Life has always been this perfect picture. They have always done very well.* (Teacher 01)

#### **4.9 Health education is inadequate for senior students**

Both student and teacher participants reported that compulsory health education only exists until the end of Year 10. In response to this, student participants have reported the need for more health education in the areas of relationships, sexual education and self-esteem. Participants reported feeling helpless in situations and

as though they didn't have the skills to manage their experiences appropriately, both inside and outside of school. Within the focus group, several points arose. First, in discussion of whether more health education would be useful for the students lives, some responses included: *'Yes, I think it would give us a different perspective from what we did in Year Nine and 10'* (Student 01) and, *'I think the dynamics change once you get older and there's different stuff you need to know'* (Student 02).

Second, and given the religious expectations of the school, students felt misinformed regarding how they should conduct romantic relationships. Within an individual interview, one participant stated, *'...and with the Catholic thing, you've got to wait till marriage and once you get married you have babies'* (Student 01). The students all agreed this was an unrealistic way to look at teenage sexual experiences. Students would instead prefer religious education and sexual health education to include *'this is what the bible teaches and in our lives we can do 'this' as a realistic thing in these situations'* (Student 01). Another student commented, *'Where is the 'you need to find a guy who is right for you, and if you feel this way then you need to do the right steps.' But we have none of that. We just have the 'don't get pregnant, here you go'* (Student 03).

Third, students felt they weren't equipped with the skills needed to manage romantic relationships. For example, one participant said, *'...and what if you fall in love with somebody?' (Student 01), and another participant followed with, 'yeah obviously you're not gonna want to wait'* (Student 03). Three participants spoke of sexual relationships they had been in and all participants shared dialogue of interactions with young men, flirtatious relationships or dating. It was commonly noted that the participants learned how to deal with these situations through watching and talking with peers who had also shared these experiences, rather than gaining the knowledge through health education classes. Furthermore, an individual interview with the school's guidance counsellor demonstrated concerns regarding the lack of health education administered in the senior years. She states, *'the religious programme is restraining, regimented and examinational. Students need a*

*realistic health forum and we've got to provide it'* (Teacher 02). Another teacher interviewed supported this opinion by saying, *'I think the sex education programmes don't do it very well for senior students because they are taught the religious studies programme. It's conflicting messages. In society now, it's a part of life that women are having these sexual experiences'* (Teacher 01).

#### **4.10 Negative stigma surrounds mental and emotional health**

All participants described times in which they were stressed, felt anxious, experienced low self-esteem or struggled to manage conflicts with peers and in relationships. In regards to this, participants noted that *'...being emotionally healthy is important'* (Student 03) and that *'you've got to be in the right frame of mind to deal with life'* (Student 04). Throughout all individual interviews however, seeking emotional help was perceived as weak and for *'those people who are troubled'* (Student 01). For times in which students felt they needed extra mental and emotional support, they instead dealt with their issues by *'trying to ignore it and trying to carry on'* (Student 04), *'bottling it up'* (Student 01) and *'ignoring it because you can't deal with some issues'* (Student 03). Although most participants reported not seeking mental and emotional health support, one participant did discuss her confidence in being resilient and open to support. Although the school's guidance counsellor wasn't mentioned, this particular individual liked to seek support from her parents, friends and other adult members (Student 02).

Three out of the four student participants spoke of declining mental and emotional support from the school's guidance counsellor. Furthermore, two participants did not want to seek support from family members or teachers. One participant noted, *'I know that I can't talk to my mum about all that kind of stuff as she'll just take it out of proportion'* (Student 01). Another participant said, *'there's one teacher who you can talk to, but only if you are close to her.'* Participants demonstrated negative attitudes in seeking emotional health support from parents, teachers and the guidance counsellor. Most commonly, participants were extremely reluctant to seek guidance counsellor support. One participant described her understandings of the guidance counsellor as: *'the guidance counsellor at our school is usually for Year*

*Nine and 10s who have their problems. So when Year 13s go to her door it's like 'they have a problem'' (Student 01). In questioning another student regarding her understandings of emotional support in the school, she offered the following:*

*I: So how do you deal with the pressures?*

*S03: You can't deal with these issues.*

*I: Are there support systems to help you with these emotional needs?*

*S03: No*

*I: What about the guidance counsellor?*

*S03: I had to go to the guidance counsellor because my school made me.*

*I: How do you think people perceive the guidance counsellor?*

*S03: Personally the guidance counsellor just frustrated me. You've either got a problem, or you're too lazy to go to class.*

*I: Is there a lack of help for those girls who need emotional help?*

*S03: Yeah. And I think people judge too much in school to be a certain way.*

Another participant shared the same opinion as above. When asked her perception of seeking support from the guidance counsellor, she stated, *'yeah she's seen in a negative way and people say she's no good'* (Student 04). She continued with, *'and some girls don't know how to talk to people and they bottle it up'* (Student 04). The guidance counsellor demonstrated awareness of this issue through mentioning the existence of negative perceptions around emotional wellbeing as well as saying, *'I think girls would be restrained by reaching out for support, for fear of what people*

*might think'* (Teacher 02). Although students perceived guidance counselling in negative ways, this service seems to be the most available and accessible for students. First, the students know the service exists before and during school. Second, the guidance counsellor mentioned, *'I have a texting system 24/7, my door opens at 7am as well as at morning tea and lunch. They don't have to come out of class, they don't need to make an appointment and I counsel via email'* (Teacher 02). It is important to also note the guidance counsellor's efforts and understandings of students. She explains, *'I'm not for everybody. We are all different and not everyone might relate to me'* (Teacher 02). The counsellor notes other free counselling services around Christchurch and exhibits this information in alternative places such as in newsletters, around the school and in the library (Teacher 02). It is shown through this that students are given a variety of services, but attendance is not undertaken or viewed positively by any participants. Thus, perhaps student misunderstandings and negative stigma around these services is a barrier to mental and emotional wellbeing.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

#### 5.1 Curriculum influences on student femininity

It is proposed that schools are a central place in which gender identity is formed and developed (Clelland, 2011). With adolescents spending a large proportion of their time at school, students are a part of an environment that involves school wide, teacher and peer influences. These influences contribute significantly towards a student's understanding of gender identity (McBride, 2011; Clelland, 2011). In relation to school wide influences, the participants in this study spoke of the school curriculum as being an influence over their understanding of femininity. It was evident that students and teachers felt restricted by the subjects offered in their school. One teacher participant stated, *"... we still fit the mould that the only technology subjects we offer are sewing and cooking. We are almost pigeonholing women that that is all they want to do"* (Teacher 01). A student participant also stated, *".... we've always had cooking and sewing as being a part of a girls school"* (Student 02). These quotes suggest that sewing and cooking are subjects deemed by the school to be more appropriate for women, and through being offered over other technologies (such as woodwork and metalwork), convey to students that these skills/interests are central to 'womanhood'. These subjects then become part of students' learned gender identity as a female. A teacher participant also noted the lack of subject choices to do with business. However this teacher did state, *"we are looking into economics and business; we are introducing those sides of the curriculum"* (Teacher 01). Once again this example again highlights the direct influence of the curriculum on student femininity. With students not being able to choose business related subjects, this may encourage students to perceive business to be a domain not appropriate to their femininity, but in fact a domain most appropriate for the male gender (Vantieghe, Vermeersch & Can Houtte, 2014).

In a study by Schneeweis and Zweimuller (2011), the differences between the career choices for females and males were explored. This study found gender segregation

in various fields of work. In particular, the labour market demonstrated high degrees of gender segregation, as it remained highly dominated by males. Occupational segregation was also evident in university degree choices. In the OECD in 2006, female graduates in the fields of engineering, science and business were approximately 30%. In comparison, over 75% of graduates in health, social services and education were females. It is suggested that career foundations are laid much earlier than university in one's educational journey. High school education, specifically, is pertinent in shaping women's choices of university degree subjects and thus, occupational fields.

It has been suggested that single-sex schools allow students more freedom to explore individual abilities and interests, especially for female students (Schneeweis & Zweimuller, 2011). These authors' research also suggests that female students currently do better in typically male dominated subject areas and are more likely to choose these subjects when placed in single-sex environments. A reason for this is thought to be because students do not feel pressure to enact typical gendered identities in front of peers of the opposite sex. Therefore, students are able to engage more openly in subjects and activities different to typical gendered behaviour (Schneeweis & Zweimuller, 2011; Sikora, 2014).

In contrast, Vantieghem et al. discussed the learning behaviour of female students in co-educational classrooms. Traditionally, female students have demonstrated less confidence, higher anxiety and a greater fear of success than male students. This was thought to be due to textbooks not reflecting female interests and positive role models for female students as well as male students dominating classroom and teacher attention. Thus, typically, single-sex schools allow for more classroom opportunity, greater teacher attention to the female sex as well as higher levels of confidence in individual success (Vantieghem et al., 2014). Although single-sex schools demonstrate positive outcomes for female students, the single-sex school in this study lacks typically male subject areas, thus not allowing female students to fully explore and expand their abilities and interests. For students to reap gender related benefits from this school environment, the school ideally needs to expand



subject choices, allowing female students to explore subjects of interest regardless of normative gendered identities (Sikora, 2014). This is supported by one participant who stated *“the school is looking at allowing students to expand their technology subjects to woodwork and other hard materials. I think that will be important so we have more choice”* (Student 02).

## **5.2 Teacher and religious influences of student femininity**

The results of this study revealed that students gain understandings of femininity through the teachers in their school. According to student participants, teachers came across as women who were confident in their abilities, competent, strong and independent. Through teacher influence, students also understood that women possess the potential for leadership and confidence. This was evident through a student commenting about a teacher: *“she had this mannerism about her that oozed authority. She had a very authoritative stance and she was in a high position in the school”* (Student 02).

Student participants also named values they thought were important to their lives. In response to this, one particular participant stated that being a young woman involves being *‘...strong and capable. And to realise our potential’* (Student 03). Students also listed honesty and respect as values important to them. The students’ responses regarding their values were similar to the teacher participants’ responses. For example, the teachers listed passion, ambition, independence and respect as values they thought were important for students’ lives. It may be suggested from this that students were learning that femininity involved leadership potential, being competent and confident, possessing integrity and reaching one’s own personal potential.

It is evident that these students had admiration for their teachers. It is important to note here that teachers are constant role models to students, whether realised by the teacher or not (McGee & Fraser, 2008). This is a powerful idea when thinking about the influence teachers may have over femininity constructions within the

classroom or school. Role modelling is suggested to be the way in which teachers portray their thoughts, opinions, values and behaviours to students (McGee & Fraser, 2008). Examples of role modelling may involve student-teacher discussion, choice of content to be explored in the classroom, the physical image of the teacher and opinions and values shared by the teacher. Thus, the ways in which teachers think, behave and voice their opinions is influential to a student's development of femininity (Carrington, 2012).

In contrast to the teacher-inspired understandings of femininity however, students also understood femininity in a different way. Through religious education and religious education teachers, students understood their role as a woman as something other than leadership or competence. Instead, students learned that they should aspire to be a good and obedient wife, have children and be a good mother. For example, one participant stated, *"yeah, it's like you need to do this and have a full time job, but also be a mother and go home and cook dinner for your family"*. The participant continued to say, *"like, you're going to go on and do great things and go to New York if you want to... but then find a man and settle down and have some kids. That's what you get"* (Student 03).

There is a clear difference between the messages students received from both religious education teachers and general school teachers regarding being a young woman. This issue was evident in all individual interviews and both teacher interviews. Moreover, students expressed frustration with these conflicting ideas, particularly towards the religious expectations. It appears that the religious expectations of the school provided a narrow view of femininity, whereas non-religious education teachers and the school's general drive towards academic excellence may suggest a broader view, focused on opportunities and future careers for its students. Martino, Mills & Lingard (2004) have discussed the role of teachers and the powerful position they hold in influencing students' enjoyment and wellbeing in school. Consequently, the understandings teachers hold of gender constructions play a crucial role in how students understand their own gender development. Thus, it may be important for this school to find more of a balance

across teacher understandings in order to empower young women while enriching students' lives with Catholicism. This is important, as a positive and supportive student-teacher relationship has been recognised as being fundamental in students being engaged in learning at school (McGee & Fraser, 2008).

### **5.3 Girl code and peer influences on femininity**

Peer pressure and 'girl code' also played a dominant part in students' understandings of femininity. Peer influence was an aspect that weaved its way through students' development of self- and gender identity, and was often a determinant of participants' low self-esteem. All student participants discussed the use of 'girl code' and the constant pressure they had felt by their peers to live up to and enact this code. 'Girl code' is comprised of a set of rules that a girl follows in order to be socially accepted by her peers, including being fashionable and wearing limited amounts of clothing at social events, gossiping with friends and judging others, attending social occasions, interacting with and pleasing members of the opposite sex and ensuring one's hair and makeup is completed to peer standards. One student discussed the pressure of keeping up with 'girl code': *"I'm just constantly frustrated. Not because I want them to be like me, but because they want me to be like them. They want me to follow all these rules. Like the girl code rules"* (Student 03). Another participant who surrendered to girl code pressures stated, *"Mum always says 'save for uni, save for uni', but I need a new outfit for this party I'm going to as I've already worn my other outfits"* (Student 01). Girl code was shown to be a dominant pressure in participants' lives, as demonstrated in the following example: *"...and they were like oh my god you have to wear a skirt or no one's going to dance with you. They said that if I wear pants, I'd be [a] dyke"* (Student 03). It became evident from the results that girl code and the rules surrounding this established what it is to be feminine among peers. It also suggested that being heterosexual is an aspect that students include as part of their femininity.

Student participants detailed their experiences at social events such as parties, and in particular, the ways in which they were expected to act with male counterparts. The participants' experiences at these social events were dictated by girl code. Girl

code was discussed and understood by peer members often during school hours. In lunch times specifically, girls spent their time discussing outfits, hairstyles, alcoholic beverage choices and male counterparts who were attending the party. After the party, the girls talked again and evaluated the events of the party, people's clothing choices and interactions between the females and males. Throughout the focus group and individual interviews, students detailed their need to wear minimal clothing in order to show more skin. The girls were expected to consume alcohol with the aim of getting drunk. They were also expected to be intimate or sexual with a male: *"first of all you have to be single. It's a meat fest and alcohol has a lot to do with it"* (Student 03). Another participant stated, *"well, you wear less. You show lots of skin. Everyone wants to show lots of skin"* (Student 04). Finally, another participant stated, *"guys are everything. They [girls] want the attention from guys to make you more popular..."* (Student 03).

Objectification appears to be a significant focus of these aforementioned aspects of 'girl code'. First, girls dress and act in certain ways at social events in order to increase their appeal to males and gain their attention. In doing so, this also boosts the girls' popularity among their peers. In order to become intimate with males at parties, girls perceive that they must wear minimal clothing, show as much skin as possible, perfect their hair and makeup and wear fashionable attire. The exhibitionary nature of parties is summarised in the term 'meat fest', used by one participant to describe the way in which girls are 'on show' to a large number of males (Urban Dictionary, 2006). However, although attention received from males at parties seems largely based on physical appearance, it appears that some girls may misconstrue this as a deeper appreciation, as noted by one participant: *"that little moment of attention that the boys give her, she thinks it's them liking her, but really it's just them wanting sex because they don't care"*. The participants also discussed alcohol consumption as a way to fit into party culture. It was noted that alcohol made 'hooking up' with males easier for girls, due to their increased confidence and approachability.

Collins et al. (2012) note changes in femininity over time. In contrast from the 19<sup>th</sup> century where emphasis was placed on a woman's moral character, self-control and devotion to the community, today femininity is centred around the achievement of physical self-presentation: "normative femininity is becoming more and more to be centred on a woman's body, not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance" (Collins et al., 2012, p. 105). A similar notion of femininity is evident in the girl code expectations, with young women objectifying themselves to please male counterparts: "*guys are everything. They want the attention from guys to make you more popular I guess*" (Student 03). In doing so, the girls "internalise the habit of scrutinising their own appearance for its acceptability to the heterosexual male gaze" (Collins et al., 2012, p. 105). This aptly describes the behaviour of participants at parties and during lunchtime discussions as they analysed appropriate dress and behaviour that may be pleasing to the male counterpart.

The peer pressures these adolescents face are similar to those presented in the literature. Maxwell and Chase (2008) and Fanning (2003) highlight peer pressure as being a dominant aspect in adolescent lives as individuals seek understandings of gender and self-identity. It is suggested that adolescents will commonly face peer pressures involving engagement in sexual activity, smoking, alcohol consumption, being physically appealing and attending high school parties. Adding to this, alcohol and sexual activity are said to be two of the largest pressures adolescents face (Fanning, 2003; Maxwell & Chase, 2008). As adolescents lack dating experience, they therefore rely on sociocultural norms to guide their behaviour in heterosexual contexts. Alcohol intoxication is promoted as a central aspect in situations such as parties. Alcohol affects a person's judgement, behaviour, memory and motor skills, increasing the risk of sexual activity, sexual assault and driving under the influence. Thus, these female adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual activity and may be at risk of making poor decisions, particularly in regards to their intimacy with a male (Deas & Clark, 2009; Nguyen, 2013). Furthermore, participants may be learning that being under the influence of alcohol is an appropriate way to conduct sexual relationships.

#### 5.4 Self-identity of adolescent females

Participant self-identity has been shown to be influenced by the school curriculum, teachers and peers. First, the school curriculum was commonly noted as hindering student opportunities through not offering typically male subjects such as business and hard material technologies. Thus, it limited student interest and career pathways due to its gendered stereotypes. Second, students were exposed to contradictory understandings of femininity through teachers. Some teachers promoted student independence, capability and leadership and students had a desire to reach their potential and gain good career outcomes. Contrary to this, religious education teachers encouraged students to prioritise being a good wife and mother. Through these messages, students understood motherhood as a more important aspect than career opportunities. Third, peers had a dominant effect on participants' femininity constructions and development of self-identity. It was evident that participants felt considerable peer pressure to act, dress and be a certain way according to 'girl code'. Considering these influences together and the pressures and conflicting ideas associated with femininity, participants' frustration and confusion relating to their gender and role as a woman is understandable.

Participants detailed the personal values that are important to their lives and future ambitions. These included being a leader, ambitious, passionate, capable, strong, honest and respectful of themselves and others. Participants demonstrated their desire to be knowledgeable, independent, goal driven women with integrity. For example, a participant stated: *"I would be very disappointed in myself if I looked back and I got successful through disrespectful and dishonest methods. Not only as a woman, but also as a person in general... But especially as a woman"* (Student 02). Interestingly however, participants seldom exhibited these values in contexts involving the use of girl code, such as parties, mufti days and lunch time discussions. The wearing of minimal clothing, intoxication and sexual activity at parties not only indicates a lack of, but also is likely to compromise self-respect. Similarly, lunchtime discussions involving negative judgement of other people's physical appearance and behaviour during social events does not demonstrate respect for others.

Participants also commonly gave into peer pressure in order to be socially accepted. It is evident within these examples that peer pressure to some extent compromises participants' espoused personal values of integrity, self-respect, respect for others, strength and honesty. Also, these examples do not align with Catholic education values such as not having sex before marriage: *"and with the Catholic thing, you've got to wait till marriage and once you get married you have babies"* (Student 01). Thus, it may be suggested that participants are compromising their own self-identity in order to fulfill the social expectations of others.

Changes in self-identity were common for participants in this study. Participants often felt pressure to be 'different' depending on the environment they were in. Three out of the four student participants noted they acted and thought differently when they were around their peers, teachers and parents. For example, one participant stated: *"I'm different when I am around my self compared to when I'm with my friends or my teachers or my family and it's all completely different. It's like I am three different characters"* (Student 01). Similarly, Student 03 stated: *"I get very confused... Am I supposed to be this person who keeps jumping around or do I be myself? And I have wasted a lot of energy changing for people"*. Although participants have experienced confusion from these experiences, this is noted as being common in the older adolescent age group. Identity confusion in adolescence is defined as having *"a lack of clarity regarding who one is, including roles and belief systems"* (Ferrer-Wreder, Palchuck, Poyrazli, Small & Domitrovich, 2008, p. 96). Adolescence is considered to be a time in which an individual attempts to understand who they are, their roles, values and beliefs (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2008). In doing so, adolescents experiment with different identities in order to understand different social contexts and gain social belonging.

As a part of identity development, adolescent individuals start to minimise the dependence they have on parents and instead move towards establishing their independence and creating stronger bonds with peers (Ohlhaber, 2011). At this stage, adolescents desire social affirmation and connectedness with their peers. Social acceptance therefore becomes a priority and perhaps explains the

importance of participants adhering to the use of girl code in order to gain social belonging (Ohlaver, 2011). It is through social belonging that an adolescent may maintain and enhance their mental and emotional wellbeing. However, some adolescent females who have disruptions in their relationships are more at risk of depression due to having higher levels of investment than boys in friendships and romantic relationships. Moreover, adolescents who are part of peer groups involving risky behaviour may have increased levels of stress and more vulnerability to mental health problems (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2008). It is therefore concluded that schools need to be aware of the dynamics involved in peer relationships and the importance of social belonging in adolescent identity development. Particularly for female students, support and education around risky behaviours, positive peer relationships and development of self-identity is important in order to support adolescent mental and emotional wellbeing (Ohlaver, 2011).

### **5.5 Negative body image and girl code expectations influencing self-esteem**

Participants held negative perceptions of their body image due to girl code expectations. Consequently, participants' self-esteem often decreased because of this. Low levels of self-esteem came in the form of feeling inadequately dressed in front of peers, not being able to afford fashionable clothing, not having hair and makeup done to peer standard and having weight insecurities. Examples of this were many. One participant stated: *"oh my gosh, I have had so many weight insecurities just because I'm bigger and I know I'm bigger. But it still gets to me"* (Student 03). In regards to self-esteem, another participant stated *"I think in a way it lowers it because we're expected to dress in certain ways to live up to other people's standards and that kind of deflates you in a way"* (Student 01). Similarly, both teacher participants noted the pressure of body image in adolescent lives. One teacher participant stated: *"it's a hang up that some girls have and you can definitely see it within them. We do a lot of measuring of the body and you can see some of the girls are very concerned about that"* (Teacher 01).

Negative perceptions of body image are common in adolescent females. In explanation of this study's participant behaviour, Collins et al. (2012) highlight that



female adolescents internalise unrealistic and conflicting expectations of being young woman. Moreover, there is an over-emphasis on physical perfection even in young female age groups. It is also argued that young women today aim to make their body, including their heterosexual attractiveness, shape, hair and clothes, into their central 'project' of self-identity and self-definition. In a study by Paxton, Norris, Wertheim, Durkin and Anderson (2005), it was noted that girls endorse beliefs that being thin determines a girl's popularity with boys, attractiveness and dating success. In the same study, adolescent boys reported that thinness predicted a girl's perceived dating potential and attractiveness. Various studies also report the intrusion of beauty and fashion industries in the lives of young girls and women (Collins et al. 2012; Soley-Beltran, 2004). These ideas and messages are often circulated and reinforced in both female and male social groups, influencing normative expectations and behaviours of young women (Soley-Beltran, 2004). Moreover, Collins et al. (2012) note an increasing number of young women who are left alone with their peers to cope with the messages they receive from mass media that define females' self-worth in terms of their appearance.

The effects of body image expectations on young women are various. First, the increased sexualisation and sexual objectification of young women in mass media has been shown to have destructive consequences, including effects on physical and mental health, cognitive functioning, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs. As demonstrated by participants in this study, women are more likely to sexualize themselves in order to fit with these social norms, leading to negative impacts on female identity development. Second, females are more likely than boys to develop and invest in negative body image. In doing so, girls are at risk of poor self-esteem, poor self-worth, depression and eating disorders (Collins et al., 2012). Third, imagery involved in media, literature and advertising emphasises unrealistic versions of female bodies that promote physical perfection and thinness. Women often internalise these messages as well as make unfavourable comparisons between an idealised unrealistic form and their own bodies. This commonly results in women having negative views of the self and lowered levels of self-esteem (Collins et al., 2012).

Secondary schools play an important role in maintaining and developing students' self-esteem. During high school experiences, adolescents evolve in a context where they learn about themselves through encountering major physical, emotional, social and cognitive changes of adolescence (Morin et al., 2013). Schools need to be aware of the factors influencing student self-esteem and the messages students receive about their self-worth inside and outside of the school. It is therefore important for schools to be aware of the influence of mass media on body image, the unrealistic body imagery involved in literature and advertisements, and female adolescents' investment in body image perfection (Collins et al., 2012; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Schools may help develop more positive perceptions of body image through providing students with realistic images of female bodies in school textbooks and the patterns used for soft material classes. Schools can also look to explore content involving realistic and positive female role models. For example, careful consideration may be taken in the choice of films and texts selected in English and media studies (Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

### **5.6 Inadequate health education and its effects on low self-esteem**

Considering that the role of a school is to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of students (Ministry of Education, 2007), it is imperative that students receive high quality health education. Unfortunately however, health education is only compulsory up until Year 10 in New Zealand schools (Cushman, 2008). As stated previously, participants reported negative impacts to their self-esteem as a result of peer pressure and 'girl code' expectations. Social exclusion, interruptions to academic performance, poor choices in sexual partners, abandonment of personal values and increased alcohol consumption were also reported. Students reported that these challenges and their self-esteem worsened when they lacked the appropriate information or skills, a situation perpetuated by inadequate health education in senior years. In general participants reported being ill-informed and unable to deal with issues affecting their self-esteem and general emotional wellbeing.

There are several compelling reasons for health education to continue into the senior years:

- There is a clear gap in senior students' understandings of mental and emotional health, with students relying on knowledge from their education before Year 11 and the understandings they assume from the environment around them. Students also reported inadequate sex education and confused understandings of identity-development.
- Second, participants are experiencing challenges and changes that are altogether different to those in their junior high schooling. Thus, health education that targets senior students' physical, cognitive and social changes will be beneficial to enhancing positive and healthy outcomes (Collins et al., 2012).
- Third, the consequences of low and high self-esteem are numerous. High levels of self-esteem increase an individual's resilience in dealing with failure, social rejection and negative social feedback. High self-esteem creates more emotionally stable adolescence and reduces risks of psychological distress (Morin et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). It is also important to note that females report lower levels of self-esteem than males in adolescence. Adolescence is a time when these differences emerge and is the time when these differences are the largest (Zeigler-Hill, 2013).
- Having access to sexuality education in the senior years may allow students to be better informed and make more positive and healthy choices regarding sex, sexual partners and consumption of alcohol (Maxwell & Chase, 2008). Thus, students' self-esteem is more likely to flourish if sexuality education supports healthy behaviour and choices (Fenton, 2012).
- Finally, other New Zealand based research focusing on young people has found health education to be ineffective and somewhat irrelevant to the needs of senior students. Allen (2005) and Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) report participants who deem health education as repetitive, irrelevant and/or boring. Sexuality education in particular is seen to be basic and is believed to lack relevance and impact (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006). A more recent study by Fenton (2012) highlights health education, in particular sexuality education, as being irrelevant

to senior students' needs. Fenton notes a disparity between sex education policy-makers in terms of what is to be taught and what is desired and needed, as described by students themselves within her study.

Schools play a crucial role in supporting the mental and emotional learning and development of students (Macklem, 2011). It is therefore important that schools reflect and question their role in how they support mental and emotional learning in the school environment. Schools may enquire into ways that they can expand the learning of emotional and sexual health, particularly if students report feelings of confusion and misunderstanding of these subjects (Hargreaves, 2013). Schools should also include curriculum and policy initiatives that incorporate real life connections to the social and cultural norms of adolescent lives that perpetuate unhealthy understandings of femininity and emotional wellbeing (Martino, Kehler & Weaver-Hightower, 2009). Barriers to the implementation of health education are also evident in co-education state high schools (Hargreaves, 2013). However, research that investigates the unique or specific barriers faced by single-sex Catholic high schools is also needed. This may open up opportunities for students to gain health education in the areas that are needed most.

### **5.7 Negative stigma affecting participants' access to school support services**

Participants in this study highlighted the negative stigma surrounding mental and emotional health. This stigma prevented students from seeking mental and emotional support from the school's guidance counsellor. Participants discussed various reasons why this negative stigma occurred. First, participants spoke of the guidance counsellor as frustrating and '*no good*' (Student 04). Second, participants were afraid to seek support for fear of what their peers may think. Third, participants assumed the guidance counsellor was for junior school students. If a senior student sought help, this was seen as abnormal and weak (Student 01). Finally, participants were unable to identify times in which they needed support. Instead they tried to ignore their problem, '*bottled their feelings up*' and believed their issues could not be dealt with.

These participants' perceptions of stigma are consistent with the literature. Bowers et al. (2013) noted students' perceptions of barriers in seeking school mental health services. These included the belief that mental health support would not help, the belief that gaining help and support was a sign of weakness, not admitting the need for help or having a problem, not knowing who to go to when help was needed and feeling embarrassed about seeking mental and emotional support. Participants in this study also reported feelings of isolation from parents and teachers when they felt emotional support may be needed. For example, a participant stated: *"I know I can't talk to my mum about all that kind of stuff as she'll just take it out of proportion"* (Student 01). Another participant noted: *"there's one teacher you can talk to, but only if you are close to her"* (Student 04). Similarly, participants in a study by Chandra and Minkovitz (2007) felt that their teachers should be more understanding of mental health and have awareness of how to help students with mental health concerns. Further, teachers in a study by Short, Ferguson and Santor (2009) reported feeling unprepared to identify or deal with mental health concerns and problems.

A suggested way of decreasing negative stigma surrounding youth mental and emotional health is to change the culture of schools (Lee, 2009; Macklem, 2011). Ideally, schools should be places where students and teachers feel comfortable to seek information and support services. Mental health should not be viewed negatively, and all schools should promote and support mental health (Lee, 2009; Macklem, 2011). Health education is thought to be a way to facilitate this. Health education may educate students and encourage more positive and healthy views of mental health and support services (Lee, 2009). This is important, as research has shown a decrease in stigmatised views when students have more knowledge of mental health (Bowers et al., 2013).

Changing a school's culture to minimise stigma is important for various reasons. First, like the participants in this study, young people are susceptible to stigma and are less likely to access mental health support services when they are concerned with peer acceptance and peer interaction at school. Second, the rate of unmet

mental health needs is precariously high. In the United States, it is estimated that 70% of adolescents who have a mental health need do not gain access to mental health services (Macklem, 2011). Stigma is suggested to be the most common reason for this. Lastly, many consequences of unmet mental health needs are apparent. Students who struggle emotionally are unable to learn or thrive to their potential. Thus, addressing the mental health of students is a prerequisite to learning and achievement (Macklem, 2011). The most severe consequence is suicide. Approximately, 90% of those adolescents who commit suicide in the United States have had unmet mental health needs. Interestingly, and although many mental health programmes have been successful, young people are still reluctant to access mental health services (Macklem, 2011). Thus, further research investigating this issue is important, particularly if the research seeks opinions from youth as to what they regard as relevant and successful programmes (Bowers et al., 2013).

This discussion chapter has highlighted various ways in which femininity is constructed in a single-sex school environment. Students gained understandings of femininity through teachers, subject choices, curriculum areas, peers and the wider school. Concerning however is the effect some of these gender constructions had on student emotional wellbeing and self-identity. Participants reported that their self-esteem was often negatively affected by peer expectations, negative body image, inadequate health education and confusion regarding their role as a young woman. This research is consistent with previous literature, which has identified the above aspects as being detrimental to student emotional wellbeing. In alignment with previous literature, it is suggested that schools and policy makers adapt school health education, and in particular sexuality education, to better suits the needs of senior female adolescents. Literature supports the need for students to be equipped with knowledge and skills that will enable healthier choices in the areas of peer expectations, body image, alcohol use, sexual activity and self-identity. There is also a need for schools to reflect on and question the messages they send to students regarding gender identity and to find ways to reduce the negative stigma surrounding mental health.

### **5.8 'Staying true' – the self, 'rules' and constructions of femininity**

Student and teacher participants discussed a concept of the self that is internally-generated, continuous, stable and coherent, able to be drawn on to resist external pressures and influences. This concept corresponds with a particular notion of self-identity that is equally personal as well as social, maintained as separate from an external social world (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2012; Wetherell, 2010). Students talked about a 'well-understood' and confident self as a buffer, and a form of strength and integrity developed out of experiences. The guidance counsellor (Teacher 02) identified self-knowledge and critical thinking ('getting to know who I am' as part of 'basic psychology') as two important capabilities that enable students to assert themselves amidst a sometimes turbulent social context, and maintain self-esteem and wellbeing: "Year 13 girls...wouldn't be pushed and pulled so dramatically...[if they were] more assertive. Assertiveness is so essential for mental wellbeing and femininity evolvment". Although students acknowledged their identification and behaviour as contingent on the social situation, this dynamic sense of self was not perceived as wholly socially produced, or necessarily fragmented or problematic, as postmodern theoretical accounts might suggest (Wetherell, 2010). This finding corresponds with calls in the literature to revisit a 'middle ground' with respect to self and identity (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2012).

'Following rules' is perhaps the overarching theme in student participants' experiences of femininity. Young women experience tension in complying with the somewhat contradictory norms promoted within the school environment – between a religious education emphasis on motherhood and marriage, contrasted with a broader curriculum focus on academic achievement and career aspirations. Young women are also subject to peer group norms and expectations relating to femininity, embodied in 'girl code'. Several participants noted that their compliance with girl code compromised their self-integrity and their emotional wellbeing – a strong sense of self and adherence to personal values were presented as possible, more constructive responses.

**Who is making the rules?** As the research findings indicate, there is the opportunity for both schools and young women themselves to modify their respective feminine constructions and associated expectations or 'rules', to resolve inconsistency and dissonance, and support student wellbeing. Reviewing and updating the messages delivered in religious education, alongside a 'fit for purpose' health education programme, is the challenge for 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholic schools. The development of an alternative to 'girl code', based on leadership, personal integrity and positive forms of feminine being and relating, is the equally important challenge for 21<sup>st</sup> century young women.

### **5.9 Limitations of the study**

This study involved several limitations that need to be considered for future research. This was a small study that included four students and two teachers. A larger number of students and teachers from a wider range of single-sex Catholic schools could have provided a greater breadth of data. In conducting a larger study with more time and resources, it would be interesting to explore differences and similarities of student and teacher understandings across a range of schools. However, although small numbers of participants are sometimes deemed a limitation of qualitative research, the richness of statements from students and teachers provided in-depth insights into the world of senior students, teachers and student wellbeing. Thus, the findings from this study nevertheless add to the large body of evidence gathered from other research.

The focus group, which proved to be an effective source of data, was made up of different friendship groups. Although the participants of this study opted into the project voluntarily, it is important to note the hierarchies involved in the group that may have influenced the data. It was evident in the focus group that one participant in particular dominated group discussion. Whilst I made every effort as the facilitator to be inclusive of all group members, the dynamics of the group may have influenced the openness of some participants' responses.

A further limitation was the time that was available to conduct the research. The research was conducted at a time of year that was particularly busy for the school.



Nearing the end of the final term, students and teachers were concerned with exams, reports, marking and so on. Ethically, I negotiated interview times that would not intrude on student and teacher commitments. However, if data collection occurred at an earlier time of year in which the school environment was more relaxed, I may have been able to spend more time with participants, thus gaining richer data.

Despite the limitations of this study, I do believe it has been successful in achieving its aims. Furthermore the research has given the participants and I the opportunity to understand and reflect on topics pertinent to the wellbeing of senior students in a single-sex school environment.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

#### 6.1 Summary

This study investigated how the emotional wellbeing of female students was influenced by constructions of femininity in a Catholic single-sex high school environment. This study elicited student and teacher understandings and perceptions through the use of qualitative tools and methods underpinned by interpretivist and social-constructivist orientations. Four student and two teacher participants were a part of this study. Based on participant responses from semi-structured interviews, three key points emerge:

First, students understood their role as a woman in part through the school subjects made available to them. Students learned that subjects such as sewing and cooking were a part of their femininity, whereas hard materials and business related subjects were deemed to be not appropriate to their femininity, but in fact a domain most appropriate for the male gender. In parallel with this, teachers within the school encouraged students to be driven and academically excellent. Students understood academic success as being able to obtain the skills needed for their future career ambitions. However, the school's religious expectations encouraged students to be good future wives and mothers and to stay at home raising children. Participants found these ideas confusing and contradictory, and this was noted to be an aspect that negatively affected student self-identity.

Second, peer group expectations provided student participants with stringent social rules and pressures that often lowered levels of emotional wellbeing. In particular, 'girl code' proved to be a set of social rules that students abided by in order to gain social acceptance. These social rules pressured participants to dress, act and behave in certain ways in order to meet other student's expectations. These pressures that participants experienced, as well as the effects this had on lowering student emotional wellbeing, are consistent with previous literature.

Third, inadequate health education was shown to be an issue for student participants. It was perceived that the school does not provide the education and support that might equip students with skills and competencies needed to deal with peer pressure and gender development challenges. Combined, peer pressure and inadequate health education appeared to perpetuate the negative stigma surrounding mental and emotional health, and thus inhibited student's use of mental health support services within the school.

## **6.2 Implications**

This research has provided an insight into the understandings and challenges involved in students' feminine gender constructions and influences on emotional wellbeing. Thus, this study has generated a number of implications that teachers, schools, health practitioners and future researchers should consider:

- Single-sex schools need to be aware of the ways in which gender is constructed in the school environment. Subject choices and teacher beliefs impacted on the way students perceived their femininity and role as being a young woman. Thus, teachers and single-sex schools should work to eliminate gendered stereotypes that restrict young women's interests and opportunities.
- 'Girl code' proved to be a factor that influenced students' self-esteem and self-identity significantly. An implication of this is that teachers and schools need to be aware of female peer dynamics and seek ways to facilitate healthy relationships and identity development of its students. Further, health education personnel should factor in female peer group dynamics when implementing emotional wellbeing programmes, curriculum and policy initiatives aimed at female adolescents. Furthermore, any of these types of initiatives must take place in a safe environment while involving realistic and real-life connections to the cultural and social norms that perpetuate gender-based behaviours.
- Student and teacher participants highlighted conflicting ideas between the health education that students felt they needed and the restrictions Catholic education placed on this. It may be suggested therefore that this single-sex Catholic school strives to achieve a balance between delivering relevant and realistic health education that is suitable and respectful of Catholic values.

Overall, health education needs to be more accessible for senior students. The results of this study suggest that health education that supports understandings and coping strategies for self-esteem, identity confusion and body image is needed. Further, health education needs to promote a positive view of mental and emotional health and encourage the use of the school's mental health service.

### **6.3 Areas for future research**

Further research in a number of areas is needed to improve understanding of feminine gender construction and its role in relation to emotional wellbeing in female adolescents. Mentioned as a limitation, a small number of individuals participated in this study. Therefore, it may be worthwhile researching whether female adolescents in other single-sex Catholic schools experience similar or different perspectives to the participants in this study. More specifically, what are other female senior students' perceptions of 'girl code' and body image expectations, and how does this affect their self-esteem and general emotional wellbeing? In regards to supporting the emotional health needs of senior students, this research pointed out a need for students to have better access to relevant and realistic health programmes. Further research therefore could be concerned with investigating senior students' perceptions and opinions of factors that would make an interesting, relevant and realistic health programme that best supports their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Throughout and on reflection at the conclusion of this study, many other research questions arose. These questions remain unanswered and could therefore prompt further areas of research. With peer expectations shown to be a significant determinant of adolescent emotional wellbeing, it may be important to explore this further. Thus, further research questions may include: Where does 'girl code' come from? What interventions could be put into place to minimise the negative impact of 'girl code'? In what ways could young women learn to support other young women through respecting and valuing each other's contributions and differences? The school and its curriculum was also shown to influence individuals' gender

understandings and emotional wellbeing. Thus, further research questions in regards to this may be: In what ways can schools provide positive and healthy examples of women throughout the curriculum and in the use of school resources? What curriculum areas do young women in single-sex high schools want to explore and gain access to within their school? How can Catholic education be valued and respected while offering realistic and relevant mental health and sexuality education to senior students? What high school programmes have been effective in decreasing the stigma of mental and emotional health in female school environments?

## Appendix 1

### Principal Information Sheet

#### Principal Information Sheet

#### *Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*

*June 2014*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** [sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** [annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz) / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

My name is Sarah Gagliardi and I am a student at the University of Canterbury studying towards a Master of Health Sciences. As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project about Year 13 girls' emotional wellbeing and feminine identity. I am interested in hearing the perspectives of Year 13 girls and teachers in order to understand influences upon student emotional wellbeing and feminine identity in the school environment.

I would like to invite three of your students and three of your teachers to participate in this research. In doing so, each person will be asked to do the following

- Take part in one individual interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes.
- Take part in one focus group, lasting approximately 45 minutes. I will conduct one focus group with the teachers and one with the students. Each interview and focus group will be audiotaped, allowing for ease and accuracy of data collection and analysis.
- In the group interviews, participants will be asked to treat what is shared in confidence.

The students' and teachers' participation in this study is voluntary. If they decide to participate, they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without

consequence. If they withdraw, I will do my best to remove any information relating to them from my research.

All information will be stored in locked and secure facilities and/or in locked computer files and documents. The data will not be accessed by anyone outside of the research team, and will be destroyed after 5 years. As a thesis is a public document, the study will be available through the University of Canterbury library. The study may also be published in academic publications (conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles). I will take considerable care to ensure your students' and teachers' information and contributions to my research project are kept confidential (including through a group confidentiality agreement). I will also ensure that they will not be recognised by others in publications of the research findings (by de-identifying their contributions).

The results of this study will enable me to write a report about adolescent emotional wellbeing. I hope that my final report will support educators and health workers to gain a better understanding of the importance of and influences upon the emotional wellbeing and feminine identity of female adolescents.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact my supervisor or I on the details given above. If you have a complaint about the study, complaints may be addressed to: The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch or send an email to [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to allow your students and teachers to participate in this research, please complete the attached consent form. I will collect this from you on my next visit.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research.

*Sarah Gagliardi*

## Student Information Sheet

### Student Information Sheet

### *Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*

June 2014



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** [sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** [annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz) / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

My name is Sarah Gagliardi and I am a student at the University of Canterbury studying towards a Master of Health Sciences. As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project about Year 13 girls' emotional wellbeing and feminine identity. I am interested in hearing the perspectives of Year 13 girls in order to understand the various influences upon their emotional wellbeing and feminine identity in the school environment.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in one individual interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes.
- Take part in one focus group, lasting approximately 45 minutes. A focus group is a group interview that will involve you and two other students. Each interview and focus group will be audiotaped, allowing for ease and accuracy of data collection and analysis.
- In the group interviews, participants will be asked to treat what is shared in confidence.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If you withdraw, I will do my best to remove any information relating to you from my



research. Within this study, two other students and three teachers will take part. They will also be asked to participate in an interview and focus group.

All information will be stored in locked and secure facilities and/or in locked computer files and documents. The data will not be accessed by anyone outside of the research team, and will be destroyed after 5 years. As a thesis is a public document, the study will be available through the University of Canterbury library. The study may also be published in academic publications (conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles). I will take care to ensure what you say and contribute, remains confidential, and within the group interviews (through a group confidentiality agreement). I will also make sure you cannot be recognised by others in publications of the research findings (by de-identifying your and others' contributions).

The results of this study will be used to write up a final report about adolescent emotional wellbeing. Your participation in this research will allow health workers and teachers to gain deeper understandings about emotional wellbeing and feminine identity in female adolescents.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact my supervisor or I on the details given above. If you have a complaint about the study, complaints may be addressed to: The Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch or send an email to [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me when I next see you.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research.

*Sarah Gagliardi*

## Parent Information Sheet

### Parent Information Sheet

### *Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*

*June 2014*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** [sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** [annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz) / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

My name is Sarah Gagliardi and I am a student at the University of Canterbury studying towards a Master of Health Sciences. As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project about Year 13 girls' emotional wellbeing and feminine identity. I am interested in hearing the perspectives of Year 13 girls and teachers to understand the various influences upon student emotional wellbeing and feminine identity in the school environment.

I would like it if your daughter participated in my research. Two other students and three teachers will also participate. If you allow your daughter to take part, she will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in one individual interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes.
- Take part in one focus group, lasting approximately 45 minutes. The focus group will be a group interview consisting of your daughter and two other students. Each interview and focus group will be audiotaped, allowing for ease and accuracy of data collection and analysis.
- In the group interviews, participants will be asked to treat what is shared in confidence.

Your daughter's participation in this study is voluntary. If she decides to participate, she has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If

she withdraws, I will do my best to remove any information relating to her from my research.

All information will be stored in locked and secure facilities and/or in locked computer files and documents. The data will not be accessed by anyone outside of the research team, and will be destroyed after 5 years. As a thesis is a public document, the study will be available through the University of Canterbury library. The study may also be published in academic publications (conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles). I will take considerable care to ensure your daughter's information and contributions to my research project are kept confidential (including through a group confidentiality agreement). I will also ensure that she will not be recognised by others in publications of the research findings (by de-identifying her contributions).

The results of this study will allow me to write a report about adolescent emotional wellbeing. I hope my final report will give educators and health workers a better understanding regarding the importance of and influences on emotional wellbeing and feminine identity.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact my supervisor or I on the details given above. If you have a complaint about the study, complaints may be addressed to: The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch or send an email to [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to allow your daughter to participate in this research, please complete the attached consent form. Please give it to your daughter to bring with her when I next visit.

Thank you for considering your daughter's participation in this research.

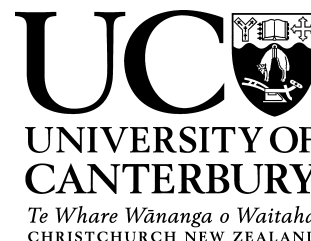
*Sarah Gagliardi*

## Teacher Information Sheet

### Staff Information Sheet

#### *Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*

*June 2014*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** [sgj171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sgj171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** [annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz) / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

My name is Sarah Gagliardi and I am a student at the University of Canterbury studying towards a Master of Health Sciences. As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project about Year 13 girls' emotional wellbeing and feminine identity. I am interested in hearing the perspectives of Year 13 girls and teachers to understand different influences upon their emotional wellbeing and feminine identity in the school environment.

I would like to invite you to be a part of this research. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in one individual interview, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If you withdraw, I will do my best to remove any information relating to you from my research. Within this study, two other teachers and three students will take part. They will also be asked to participate in an interview and focus group.

All information will be stored in locked and secure facilities and/or in locked computer files and documents. The data will not be accessed by anyone outside of the research team, and will be destroyed after 5 years. As a thesis is a public

document, the study will be available through the University of Canterbury library. The study may also be published in academic publications (conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles). I will take care to ensure what you say and contribute remains confidential. You will not be identified as the teacher in any publications of the research. The confidentiality and de-identification of your students will also be ensured.

The results of this study will allow me to write a report about adolescent emotional wellbeing. I hope my final report will give educators and health workers a better understanding regarding the importance of and influences upon emotional wellbeing and feminine identity.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact my supervisor or I on the details given above. If you have a complaint about the study, complaints may be addressed to: The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch or send an email to [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete the attached consent form and return it to me when I next see you.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research.

*Sarah Gagliardi*

## Appendix 2

### Principal Consent Form

#### Principal Consent Form

*Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing  
of Year 13 girls*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** Sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** Annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

#### Please tick each box:

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of my students and teachers if they agree to take part in this project.
- I understand their participation is voluntary and they may choose to withdraw at any stage.
- I understand any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and any published or reported results will not identify my school.
- I understand all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed in five years time.
- I understand I may receive a report on the findings of this study. I have provided my email address for this below.
- I understand I can get more information about this project from the researcher, and I can contact the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee if I have any complaints about the research.
- By signing below, I agree for this research to take place in my school.

**Full name:**

**Email address:**

**Date:**

**Signature:**

***Please give this consent form to Sarah on her next visit.***

## Student Consent Form

### Student Consent Form

*Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing  
and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** Sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** Annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

#### **Please tick each box:**

- I have read the information sheet and understand what will be required of me if I participate in this project.
- I understand the group discussions will be audiotaped
- I have read the information letter and understand that all information collected will only be accessed by the researcher and that it will be kept confidential and secure.
- I understand that neither I, nor my school, will be identified in any presentations or publications that draw on this research.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may choose to withdraw at any time.
- I understand that I can receive a report on the findings of the study. I have written my email address below for my report to be sent to.
- I understand that I can get more information about this project from the researcher, and that I can contact the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee if I have any complaints about the research.
- I agree to participate in the research and my parents have also given consent on their consent form.

**Full name (student):**

**Class/year group:**

**Email address:**

**Date:**

**Signature:**

***Please return this consent form to Sarah (the researcher) on her next visit.***

## Parent Consent Form

### Parent Consent Form

*Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing  
and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** Sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** Annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

#### **Please tick each box:**

- I have read the information sheet and understand what will be required of my daughter if she participates in this project.
- I understand the group discussions will be audiotaped and kept confidential.
- I have read the information letter and understand that all information collected will only be accessed by the researcher and that it will be kept confidential and secure.
- I understand that neither I, nor my daughter's school, will be identified in any presentations or publications that draw on this research.
- I understand my daughter's participation is voluntary and she may choose to withdraw at any time.
- I understand my daughter and I can receive a report on the findings of the study. I have written my email address below for my report to be sent to.
- I understand I can get more information about this project from the researcher, and that I can contact the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee if I have any complaints about the research.
- I agree for my daughter to participate in the research and my daughter has also given consent on her consent form also.

**Full name:**

**Email address:**

**Date:**

**Signature:**

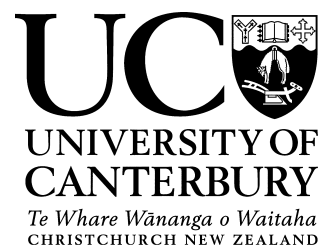
***Please give this consent form to your daughter to return to Sarah on her next visit.***



## Teacher Consent Form

### Teacher Consent Form

*Investigating influences on the emotional wellbeing  
and feminine identity of Year 13 girls*



**Sarah Gagliardi (Researcher):** Sjg171@pg.canterbury.ac.nz / 027 322 9741

**Annabel Ahuriri-Driscoll (Supervisor):** Annabel.ahuriri-driscoll@canterbury.ac.nz / (03) 366 7001 ext 44045

#### **Please tick each box:**

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in this project.
- I understand my participation is voluntary and I may choose to withdraw at any stage.
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and any published or reported results will not identify me.
- I understand all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at the University of Canterbury and will be destroyed at the completion of this project at the beginning of next year.
- I understand I may receive a report on the findings of this study. I have provided my email address for this below.
- I understand I can get more information about this project from the researcher, and I can contact the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee if I have any complaints about the research.
- By signing below, I agree to take part in this research project.

**Full name:**

**Email address:**

**Date:**

**Signature:**

***Please give this consent form to Sarah on her next visit.***

## Appendix 3

### Interview Schedule

#### Student Individual Interview Schedule

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>Location</b>
8 <sup>th</sup> October	11am-12pm	Individual interview with Student 01	Education library: Room 205
8 <sup>th</sup> October	12pm-1pm	Individual interview with Student 02	Education library: Room 205
10 <sup>th</sup> October	1.30pm-2.30pm	Individual interview with Student 03	Education library: Room 203
10 <sup>th</sup> October	2.30pm-3.30pm	Individual interview with Student 04	Education library: Room 203

#### Focus Group Interview Schedule

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>Location</b>
17 <sup>th</sup> October	9am-10am	Focus group interview with Student 01, 02, 03 and 04.	At school in room 28

#### Teacher Individual Interview Schedule

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>Location</b>
21 <sup>st</sup> October	10am-11am	Individual interview with Teacher 01	At school in room 14
23 <sup>rd</sup> October	2.30pm-3.20pm	Individual interview with Teacher 02	At school in main office meeting room

## **Appendix 4**

### **Semi-Structured Student Individual Interview Questions**

#### **Student Interview Questions**

##### **Femininity related questions**

1. What does the term 'femininity' mean to you?
2. Where did your understandings of femininity come from?
3. How feminine do you consider yourself to be?
4. What characteristics make someone very feminine as opposed to not so feminine?
5. What top four values do you think are important to be a young woman?
6. Who taught you that those values are important? Can you give some examples?
7. How do you think the school shapes students to be feminine?
8. What messages do you get from school that tells you how to be feminine?
9. Why do you think the school tries to shape its students in this way?
10. How do you think you should act and behave to meet the school's expectations of being a young woman?
11. Do you see these values and expectations as important and relevant for your life?
12. Do you think there are specific roles that you must fill being a woman?
13. Who taught you about these roles?
14. In what ways does the school promote or teach you about the roles you should fill from being a woman?
15. Who else do you learn off that teaches you about being a woman?
16. What messages do you receive from your peers that influence how you should act and behave to be feminine?

##### **Emotional wellbeing related questions**

1. We talked about messages that you receive from school and within school about how to be feminine. How has this affected your self-esteem?

2. How do you feel when you receive these messages of how a woman is meant to be, act and behave?
3. What specific expectations and influences have affected your self-esteem the most?
4. How do you think your self-identity is affected by these messages and expectations?
5. Do you feel like you can intervene in any of these expectations that are placed on you?
6. How do you deal with these pressures and feelings of needing to be feminine?  
Can you tell me about some times when you have needed to be resilient in relation to the pressures of being a woman?

## **Semi-Structured Teacher Individual Interview Questions**

### **Teacher Interview Questions**

#### **Femininity related questions**

1. What is femininity to you?
2. Where did your understandings of femininity come from?
3. What top three values do you hold as a woman?
4. What top three values do you hope to install in your students?
5. What messages do students get from the school environment to be feminine?
6. Who is it that creates these messages?
7. Where do these messages come from?
8. In what ways does the school purposefully shape the feminine development of students?
9. In what ways does the school non-purposefully shape the feminine development of students?
10. Where do these school expectations come from?
11. How are gender roles promoted within the school curriculum?
12. Do you see these expectations to be relevant and valuable to young women today? Why, or why not?
13. In what ways should students behave to meet the school's vision of feminine development?
14. How do you think students interpret teachings of femininity within the school?

#### **Emotional wellbeing related questions**

1. We have talked about how femininity is supported/constructed within this school. How do you think these constructions of femininity affect a student's emotional wellbeing?
2. Out of the feminine influences placed on students, which ones do you think affect a student's emotional wellbeing the most?  
How does this affect their self-esteem, resilience and general emotional wellbeing?

3. You gave examples of messages that students receive within school to be feminine. What do you think the underlying feelings of students are behind these?
4. How do you think a student's self-identity is affected by these messages? How do you think students manage their emotions in response to these influences and messages?
5. How do you think student's deal with low levels of self-esteem and general emotional wellbeing?
6. What support systems are there in the school to support mental and emotional wellbeing and how do students utilise these?

## **Semi-Structured Student Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. Have you had any further thoughts after having your individual interview?
2. Were there any further aspects that you found interesting or would like to discuss further?
3. In our individual interviews, I brought up topics such as how we understand femininity, emotional wellbeing and self-identity. Would anybody like to share their thoughts on any of these aspects with the group?
4. How do you think a teacher defines femininity?
5. What values do you think the teachers in this school want to install in you in regards to being a women?
6. Do you think teachers understand the pressures that Year 13 girls experience in terms of being a young woman?
7. What aspects do you think they don't understand?
8. Think about health education at school. How well do you think emotional wellbeing (including self-esteem and self-identity) is covered?
9. What should be further taught in the health curriculum to further support girls and their needs in becoming a woman?
10. What have you experienced this morning that influenced your understandings of femininity?
11. Some of the pressure and expectations that influenced being a woman were a lot to do with peer groups. Would one of you like to share some examples of this?
12. How has your self-esteem changed from your younger years in high school till now?
13. What holds the biggest influence over your self-esteem the most, in relation to anything happening in school?
14. How do you individually deal with self-esteem, feminine or self-identity challenges?
15. What support systems can you use in your school to help enhance your emotional wellbeing? How are these utilised by you and your peers?

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