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Beauty or brains? The impact of popular culture on the development of adolescent rural gifted girls' identity and subsequent talent development

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Faculty of Social Sciences

**Beauty or brains?
The impact of popular culture on the development of adolescent
rural gifted girls' identity and subsequent talent development.**

Denise May Wood

**This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirement for the
Award of the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
of the
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ABSTRACT

Adolescent gifted girls constantly engage with popular culture in their daily lives. All forms of media provide information about appearance, achievement, identity and success. The abundance of this information from visual, printed and audio sources could influence young girls in particular ways as they grapple with identity, and aspiration. Gifted girls face the added dilemma of expectation, both internally and externally, that suggests they must achieve in a way commensurate to their talent potential. Talent development models describe the elements of the process that support the achievement of demonstrated talent. This research set out to explore the lived experience of adolescent gifted girls in rural New South Wales, Australia as they engaged with popular culture, and to evaluate its influence on their development towards achieving their talent potential.

Literature suggests that gifted girls are under pressure to achieve and to demonstrate their ability while being concurrently positioned by society to meet traditional expectations of behaviour and response. While the literature defined particular barriers for all rural gifted students that resulted from isolation, stereotyping and lack of opportunity, the specific experience of rural gifted adolescent girls is largely absent from the literature.

The most prevalent talent development model in education settings in Australia at the time of the study was that of Gagné (2005, 2008). There is no reference in this model to the difference made by gender. Gender specific talent development models or frameworks in the literature have been derived from retrospective studies of eminent older women. None of the models identified popular culture as a significant factor in the talent development process.

Abundant literature is available on the impact of popular culture on adolescents and in particular adolescent girls. Across the literature it was reported that popular culture had a powerful impact on how girls saw themselves, and what they believed they were able to achieve. Little of this literature focussed specifically on gifted girls.

Three gaps prompted the research: the dearth of information on rural gifted girls, the absence of gifted girls in the popular culture literature and the lack of acknowledgement of the impact of popular culture in talent development models.

The key question to be answered was:

In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls?

This was supported by a further three sub-questions:

1. *How do rural gifted girls respond to the concepts presented to them in popular culture?*
2. *How does what they say about themselves as 'gifted' reflect what they see in popular culture?*
3. *How does their response to popular culture change at significant points in their lives?*

The research was set in a feminist constructivist paradigm, using embedded case study methods to describe two cohorts of adolescent rural gifted girls. The first cohort was in their first year of secondary school and the second cohort in their fourth year of secondary school. Qualitative data was generated through a series of focus groups, interviews and journals over a period of 18 months. Analyses of the data were undertaken within the frame of the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (Gagné, 2005, 2008) which suggested a number of catalysts in the developmental process of talent that influenced the process. Using grounded theory methods of data coding and analysis, key themes around relationships, achievement, giftedness, popular culture, and identity were described. A narrative was then constructed to articulate the relationship the girls have with popular culture.

To ensure a set of diverse experiences, two school sites were utilised. Both school sites were in a regional setting in NSW, and both were in the public school sector. Participants were identified through their results in standardised testing that had occurred in the previous year. This identified them as academically gifted, and the identification was confirmed by further anecdotal information from their schools.

Findings from the research identified that adolescent rural gifted girls are influenced in their aspiration towards talent development by a number of external agents,

including popular culture. Popular culture was found to potentially both support and disrupt talent development. The importance of a balanced set of influences and a strong sense of identity in managing the impact of popular culture was highlighted. The knowledge gained from the results of the study informed the design of a model that framed the talent development process for rural adolescent gifted girls suggesting that support is required to help girls critically respond to the messages in popular culture, develop their identity as talented individuals and seek role models both within and outside of popular culture examples. A key finding was that, in a world where popular culture promotes global fame, there is a place for localised talent, allowing a rural girl to feel able to choose where she will achieve her talent. An understanding of the concept that talented achievement is not only about global fame in the media, but also about acclaim at local community levels will support adolescent rural gifted girls to aspire to achieve their talent potential.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“It is so hard to choose whether to be brainy or beautiful.”

A fifteen-year-old academically gifted girl in a regional area in New South Wales, Australia, found it difficult to make the choice between striving for intelligence or beauty. Like many adolescent girls, she read magazines and watched visual media, enjoying the entertainment and information available to her. Was her dilemma made more difficult by the interactions she had with popular culture? Did her question emerge from examples and ideas gleaned from magazines, television or the Internet?

Feminism challenged the roles and expectations of women over the twentieth century, advocating for women to be positioned by society on equitable grounds with men. Through three waves of feminism, women achieved the right to vote, the opportunity to choose to participate in higher education and the opportunity to contribute their voices in diverse contexts (de Beauvoir, 1952; Friedan, 1963). However, popular culture continued to illustrate the ideal life for a woman to be one where she sought a look that met expectations of beauty and size, and where the finding of a mate was a prime goal.

1.2 Life as a Girl

For today's adolescent girls, feminism may be an historical concept perhaps irrelevant to everyday life. When they choose, they are able to experience high quality education, diverse careers and speak out about their needs and dreams. They are able to present a physical appearance that is 'girlie', derived from popular culture sources, or to create an identity that reflects the personal power they have over their bodies (Karlyn, 2006; Snyder, 2008). However, a dilemma arises when this is misinterpreted differently by other groups in wider society, who read it as a reinforcement of more traditional views of women. Conditioning still occurs through subliminal messages across the media that continue to influence the way young girls see themselves and their futures. The images and messages in popular culture could make it difficult for gifted girls to pursue their goals, creating the dilemma posed in the opening question from a gifted adolescent girl in a rural context.

Issues such as power, communication, relationships and identity form a backdrop to the period of adolescence, when girls are seeking their role and place in society. Popular culture continues to position women in roles that suggest ways of behaving and responding that contradict the seminal message of feminism and suggest the use of power as a manipulative tool used to achieve personal gain at the expense of others (McRobbie, 2007; Showden, 2009; Signorelli, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997). The 'Disney princess' projects an image of women that highlights and perpetuates concepts of traditional beauty and dependence, with a central focus on a relationship with a suitable partner (Cheu, 2007).

The key Australian magazine for young girls is 'Dolly', with a claimed readership of 261,000 (<http://www.bauer-media.com.au/brands/dolly>). Its target audience is adolescent girls, between the ages of 14 and 17. 'Dolly' claims to be the number one magazine for teens; its website (dolly.com.au) offers "the best in celeb gossip, advice and style news, as well as a place for teens to engage with age appropriate content". The print version is supported by a mobile phone application and a Facebook page for multi-platform access. While a 'Dolly' survey (2011) reported that readers identified success as related to university life, study or a good career, the pattern of content as described in the table of contents over a number of the magazines does not reflect this. It is a contradiction. Although the modern, rural, gifted girl is well informed and articulate, with ample opportunity to be exposed to the world through popular culture, it is unclear what she absorbs from these constant images as she sits in her regional location thinking about her future.

Gifted females are underrepresented in the media in areas such as business, politics and leadership. Those with special talents in sport, and, to a certain extent, creative arts are encouraged to nurture their talent and experience opportunities for fame or at the very least acknowledgement of ability. The fame that most adolescent girls see lauded for women is tightly bound to popular culture and celebrity. In the disciplines of science and business, the concept of equality of opportunity and expectation fought for by earlier generations of women has still not been achieved for most women. For adolescent gifted girls the direction of life is confounded by the plethora of information about appearance, relationships and fashion.

Rural contexts are presented in popular culture as idyllic landscapes where it is possible for women to fulfil creative and domestic visions, living a life that is far from the stress of urban living (Jonassen, 2012). While rural women are acknowledged as being central to both community and agricultural activity, the popular culture image of Australian rural women has continued to present a stereotypical expectation of beauty and appearance, in fashionable work clothes and untouched by the dirt and dust of rural activity. Education and talent in diverse areas of endeavour are not displayed. The power that popular culture has to influence the growth of adolescent gifted girls towards their potential is the subject of this research.

1.3 Gifted Girls

During high school, many gifted girls show a decline in self-esteem, in academic risk taking and in full engagement with the learning process (Kaufman, 1981; Pipher, 1994). Issues of achievement, choice and opportunity have emerged when, despite greater success in the school environment, gifted girls do not attend or perform as well outside of school, and they have not taken up new fields of endeavour at the same rate as males. School for girls is not always a place of encouragement, and gifted girls may be silenced, guided into different fields, or discouraged from active exploration of some curriculum areas. In a contradictory way, gifted girls can also be pressured to over achieve, and to be involved in multiple projects in the school. Girls are more likely to seek approval from adults by agreeing to the range of tasks asked of them, and over committing to meet expectations (Kerr & Sodano, 2003; Maxwell, 2007). Making career choices is challenging when messages delivered by popular culture and by peers and mentors discourage girls from aspiring to new and different fields. It is a real dilemma that the lived experience of adolescent gifted girls, especially those in Australian rural areas, is perhaps not understood, as it is not described anywhere in literature.

For young people, the drive to achieve and be successful is communicated to them as a major goal in their lives. In the field of gifted education, talent development has been theorised a number of times, to explain the connections between natural ability and the demonstration of specific skills and performances beyond the reach of most individuals. Gagné's (2009) theory of developmental giftedness and talent forms the theoretical framework for this research. Popular culture is defined in this research as

an environmental catalyst and Gagné's framework provides support for considering how it either disrupts or supports talent development, along with other elements of the environment.

Kerr and Larson (2007), Reis (1998), and Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1999) developed models from retrospective studies of talented women across a range of careers and achievements. Consistent within their models is the concept of a sense of identity as central to successful talent development. Their conclusions were supported in the Australian context by Kronborg (2008, 2009) who examined ten eminent Australian women and identified the import of a strong sense of self to drive talent development. Popular culture is not a facet of these models despite its prevalence in the lives of girls. However, popular culture provides a source of role models and information, and its accessibility ensures that girls in rural settings are able to find examples to follow. A specific, current model of talent development derived from the responses and experiences of rural, adolescent gifted girls and recognising the place of popular culture in their lives is not described in the literature.

1.4 Popular Culture and Adolescents

Historically, popular culture has been identified as having a number of different purposes, ranging from maintaining social order and custom, establishing roles and controlling the masses (Buckingham, 1993; Fishwick, 1985; Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, 2007). Conversely, it also serves to pull apart and mock the social order (Fishwick, 1985). While it represents the world, popular culture is a deliberate construction by the author, and as such reflects their view or bias, intentionally when it is constructed to exaggerate or distort reality, or unintentionally simply because it tells a story from one perspective (Fishwick, 1985).

The power of popular culture as a source of information increased with the growth of the media industry, beginning in the early nineteenth century with the development of the cinema, and increasing again with the advent of television in homes and the improvement in the printing industry. The audience was targeted with deliberate constructions of image and message to attract attention and focus interest on the content (Fishwick, 1985; Nash, 2006). Teenage girls were an important audience, as

the social changes introduced by feminist action afforded them freedom to work and have a disposable income, go out socially in groups and engage with the entertainment world. They learned about themselves and others as they engaged with movies, magazines and music, and created identities that were influenced by the information they watched in conjunction with social activity. As technology continued to improve, adolescent girls were able to learn about the lives of others in globalised images, and the quantity of available content bombarded them with images and information that crossed cultural boundaries (Fishwick, 1999; Harris, 2004).

Young people were initially considered a passive audience, simply receiving the images and messages displayed (Buckingham, 1993). However, engaging with popular culture is an interactive activity, as the audience responds to the content through the filter of their own experience and context. The power of popular culture to influence identity and change perspectives became increasingly evident through the reactions of adolescents. When teenagers became a key focus of popular culture, the content increasingly focused on their stage of life, including idealistic information about life and adulthood (Harris, 2004; Nash, 2006). Standardised story lines appeared to reflect the everyday lives of the audience. Plots included romance, friendships, the struggles of growing up, rebellion and challenging of authority, daily life and humour that made fun of groups or individuals (Nash, 2006; Walkerdine, 1990, 1997). Overlap occurred when these plotlines also appeared as key content in the information about 'real' people. The emergence of 'fandom', whereby young people idolised and imitated the actions and appearance of their idols, brought attention to the impact it had on their thinking. Girls were much more likely than boys to engage in fan clubs, idolisation and to take on the roles as defined in popular culture (Fritzche, 2004).

Gender impacts on audience response (Buckingham, 1993) when the role information and stereotyped images become the accepted way to behave. Signorelli (1997) noted links between the information presented in popular culture and the way that women solved problems and spent their time. Walkerdine (1990, 1997) noted the way that young girls demonstrated behaviours they had seen in the media, and how they were positioned through the images and implicit messages. The adolescent strives to be

different to the family and popular culture becomes an important source of information.

Popular culture is known to impact on a girl's view of herself in a physical sense, providing consistent images of beauty, body shape and size, appearance and clothing (Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2003). During adolescence, competing pressures around the importance of appearance and aspiration make it difficult for young gifted girls to make choices that reflect their ability and promote aspirations towards intellectual pursuits. While there is a large quantity of literature focused on the impact of popular culture on the identity of all girls, and their sense of self, there is little on the impact it has on the talent development of gifted adolescent girls, and particularly those who live in rural Australia. Popular culture provides access to information about life beyond the immediate geographical context but it is not clear how it supports gifted girls to aspire to achieve in their field of talent.

1.5 The Purpose of the Study

It became evident in the review of literature that a gap existed in the understanding of the way that popular culture either supported or disrupted the talent development process of adolescent gifted girls in rural Australia. A question emerged: In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls? Consideration needed to be given to understanding the way gifted girls responded to popular culture, how they saw giftedness portrayed and, finally, how their response changed over time.

This study is significant because it tells the story of gifted girls in early and later adolescence in a rural setting, describing their responses to popular culture and exploring their lived experiences as gifted young people. It is limited because it is focused on one geographical location, and on a small group of girls who were identified as gifted by their academic performance in school testing. However, it suggests that the talent development of gifted girls must take into account the development of their sense of self, as well as the personal attributes that allow them to form goals, work towards those goals, and overcome barriers including attitudes and expectations.

1.6 Conclusion

Gifted girls are a resource for the future, and those in rural areas may find themselves constrained by limited resources and information. Popular culture opens the world to them and provides them with diverse models and examples of how to be 'girl'. Because of the achievements of the feminist movement over the last century, gifted girls are able to make choices about their lives, and to contribute to the ongoing development of the sciences, the arts and the business world. Understanding the influences on the talent development of gifted girls, and their responses to it, will help educators and communities support gifted girls in Australian rural settings to achieve their potential. This study outlines the lived experiences of groups of girls in a regional city in New South Wales. It addresses the question of whether popular culture supports or disrupts the talent development of gifted rural adolescent girls.

This chapter has presented the background to and rationale for the research. Chapter 2 examines the literature on giftedness and talent to define the field of the study. It then examines the literature on gifted girls, and to describe the context of this study, on rurality and giftedness. Its final section examines the literature on popular culture with a specific focus on the reporting of studies on girls and popular culture. Chapter 3 describes in detail the methodology of the study, and the participants involved. This frames the approach to the study. Chapters 4 and 5 report the results in detail, exploring the transcripts of both focus groups and interviews and describing the responses and thoughts of the participants. At times the viewpoint of the researcher comes through, acknowledging the interactive nature of feminist research. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the results and synthesises them into the narrative that tells the girls' responses to popular culture and to their giftedness. An emergent model describing the talent development process concludes the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research explores popular culture as an influence on the talent development of gifted adolescent girls in a regional setting. The chapter begins with a brief review of the feminist perspective against which this research sits. It then examines the literature from the field of giftedness and talent development. The particular situation of gifted girls as defined in the literature is then discussed. Rurality as an issue for talent development is focused on, bringing together issues of gender and context and their potential catalytic impact on the emergence of talent. The chapter then explores the literature surrounding popular culture, and its impact on young people, especially girls. Popular culture is identified as a major influence in the lives of youth, and this review will examine studies of its influence and identify key concerns that are raised.

2.2 A Feminist Background

The development of feminism over the past century has positioned today's gifted girls in a place very different to their forebears. As early as 1869, John Stuart Mill argued that women needed to be free to aim for what they were capable of, and to use what they had to achieve their potential. He described the role of women as one that had been constructed by society. The achievement of suffrage was a major step to allow women access and voice in politics and the business world. However, women continued to be positioned as second rate members of society, a view created by forces of education and tradition, and a socialisation process that happened through language and expectation (de Beauvoir, 1952). First wave feminism rose from a need for change in lifestyle and was moved along by the women who had appropriate opportunities, allowing them choice and recognition in the political, economic and social world. Other women simply carried on their lives as they always had, deeply involved in their essential work and family (hooks, 1984).

Second wave feminism emerged to address the sense of dissatisfaction felt by many women who were unhappy with the limits on their existence and the lack of opportunity afforded them, despite better education and experience, and those who were not able to change their role as dutiful homemaker because of their

circumstances (Friedan, 1963). The message of this second wave was equality of opportunity, power, voice and access for all women. Young girls were pressured to replicate a “pretty picture of femininity” (Friedan, 1963, p. 22), receiving these messages not only from family but also from popular culture. Magazines for women only included articles about home, personal appearance and children, and visual images in advertisements and articles highlighted the ideal woman.

Popular culture modelled life from the point of view of white, middle class women but did not identify that this was not the situation for all women. The need to address the situation for marginalised women, who did not have time to voice their dissatisfaction but wanted recognition and acknowledgement of their work, was portrayed by hooks (1984). Feminism, in fact, was seen by hooks (1984) to actually oppress some women, by not recognising what their lives were like. Second wave feminists struggled with the tendency of media to make news of individual stars and celebrities, rather than represent every real woman. Women had the right to be free to make choices and to successfully navigate life free of the oppression which could come from others, from the media, from expectations. The choice was about celebrating the differences between men and women, recognising the differences in emotional, cognitive and physical development and their impact on aspirations and relationships (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Kaschak, 1992; Tavris, 1992; Walkerdine, 1990). Feminism fought for all women to become visible, with the freedom to make choices and fulfil potential, and the chance to successfully navigate a life free of the oppression that was applied by social expectation, including that represented in the media. The developmental trajectory for all women had the potential to be different than that portrayed in popular culture and this needed to be acknowledged (Kerr, 1997; Piirto, 1991; Tavris, 1992).

Recent writers spoke about the third wave of feminism and postmodern feminism as being both continuations of traditional feminist activity and discontinuities of earlier movements (Renegar & Sowards, 2009; Showden, 2009; Shreve, 1989; Snyder, 2008; Tong, 1989; van der Tuin, 2009). The literature suggested that the various waves of feminism continued to appear concurrently and could not be identified along a linear process of development. This had created some of the issues across generations and

between groups of women who followed a particular stance (van der Tuin, 2009). Key in much of the discussion were the concepts of diversity and power. A common thread in third wave feminism was about “multiplicity, ambiguity and difference” (Renegar & Sowards, 2009, p. 1), reflecting the complexity and variety of experience that women had, and making current feminism more about individual action and response than the previous collective approach (Renegar & Sowards, 2009; Snyder, 2008; Tong, 1989; van der Tuin, 2009). Third wave feminism was about young women and their response to the older groups of active women, and the embracing of earlier achievements, while at the same time rejecting them (Renegar & Sowards, 2009; Showden, 2009; Snyder, 2008; Zimmerman, McDermott, & Gould, 2009).

Power, its use and its place in the lives of women has been a central component of feminism from its outset. For young girls, learning about their power, and how to use power to address the way their gender, social class and milieu positions them is a task of growing up (Renold & Allan, 2006). Showden (2009) expressed concern about the use of power by women in inappropriate ways, describing the ‘victim approach’ where women manipulate those around them to get their own way. Signorelli (1997) described this manipulation as one of the frequent messages portrayed in popular culture in her analysis of the content of both television and magazine images.

Overall, the literature suggested that today’s young women embrace the contradictions of their own diverse lives (Renegar & Sowards, 2009; Shreve, 1989). They live in a world of complex activity, seeking to find their own identity as a dynamic perception rather than a static one. Young girls see their feminism as being something individual and reflective of their own stories and multiple identities, learning from the media of different ways to be, and seeing multiple examples of women managing complex, independent lives, that continue to include a focus on appearance and relationships. In the new feminism, girls can behave in ways that appear to be a return to traditional roles, making choices that denote an individual feminism (Karlyn, 2006; Snyder, 2008). The dilemma that this creates for adolescent girls is that such behaviour may be misinterpreted and read differently by some groups in society, leading to a reinforcing of traditional views of women and a positioning of young girls in particular ways (Walkerdine, 1990). Popular culture

reinforced the importance of appearance making it difficult for gifted girls to pursue their goals. Kline (1993) worked with adolescent girls in a leadership workshop and noted that they listed their best qualities as distinctly (traditionally) feminine. None felt that others saw, or valued them, for their intelligence or capacity to be articulate. Kline suggested that this highlighted how girls continued to be positioned, and because the messages they received from multiple sources were so integral to their lives, they were not necessarily aware of it happening.

2.2.1 Australian Women

Rural Australian women historically lived different lives to European women as they were required to undertake demanding rural work, as well as domestic tasks (Dixson, 1994). This caused an oppression of intellectual tendencies and a lack of bonding with women in the same way as in other places; these women were more isolated and spent more time with men, working in both manual labour and domestic work. They held low expectations for themselves and were not expected to achieve outside the domestic environment. “By the 1880s ... Australian women had settled into a standing uniquely low in Western-type communities, and from this flowed a curiously impoverished self-concept” (Dixson, 1994, p. 213). This led to a slower development of any women’s movement in Australia, with less impact across the full social strata, reflecting the situation argued by hooks (1984).

In the 1960s and 1970s, strong feminist writing highlighted the poor social and economic condition of Australian women and a platform of reform grew from the common language generated (Bielski, 2004). Many of the figures became leaders in the public sphere, bringing about change that included education for girls, with a focus on maths and economics, and the concept of lifelong learning for women. Workplace reform allowed for equal pay. Legal positions around rape and divorce were strengthened for women. However, Bielski also described how women continue to be constrained by societal norms reflected in the hostility women were confronted with through agencies such as the church, politics, and the press. Young women in Australia were not encouraged to oppose the prevailing views, and so they experienced conflicts between work and home, children and career. Bielski (2004) indicated that, despite advances, young women in Australia could still potentially be

positioned in ways that reduced their opportunities for career achievement and success.

The barriers to success for Australian women were not only from without but also from within and between women (Bielski, 2004; Dixon, 1994). The real life world of many women was diverse and at odds with the aims of strong academic feminists whose ideas often conflicted with those of the everyday woman (Grayzel, 1999; Henderson, 2000). In particular, the lives of rural Australian women and girls were given scant attention by the feminists from urban, middle class areas (Dixon, 1994). Rural women were seen as disadvantaged and praised for their nobleness, which was exhibited as strength in terms of drought and isolation. However, they were not seen as acting for the feminist movement. In her autobiography, Sara Henderson (1993) perpetuated the image of rural Australian women as women who had to work hard, be committed to the land, be prepared to give up their femininity for the sake of physical work, be strong in nature and powerful in their role of their location, while retaining the skills of turning on a good feast when needed.

A contrasting description of rural women was drawn by Fincher and Pannelli (2001). They studied two groups of women working for reform in their particular geographic locations, and reported the lack of driven action by the urban women to push the boundaries of societal expectation for them in their roles. The rural group of women studied by Fincher and Pannelli (2001) were mobilised by their activist project, connecting with women from a wide geographic space and seeking increased public awareness of their roles and involvement in rural agriculture. These women struggled against the constructed stereotypes and were more likely to break the expectations of traditional views of their role. They acted to make a difference and thus highlighted the complexity and diversity of life in rural settings. In rural settings, women have played roles that belie their gender out of necessity and also commitment. It is difficult to ascertain from the literature how adolescent girls in rural Australia find a sense of identity and position themselves to achieve. No feminist literature discussed the situation of intelligent, academically gifted rural girls and how they were able to shape their aspirations for talent development.

Feminism continues to focus on the problems of position for women, and the interpretations of the behaviours and responses by society at large. Throughout the

feminist literature the role that popular culture played in positioning women in work and social settings, and the way it continued to challenge the messages of feminism presented many contradictions, both within the body of literature around feminism and within the lives of women themselves. This research sets out to examine the way popular culture may reinforce the contradictions, thus providing mixed messages for young girls seeking to establish an identity true to their intellectual capacity.

2.3 Giftedness and Talent

2.3.1 Giftedness

Giftedness is a social construct that addresses individual differences and defines a particular set of behaviours and responses that are evident in some people. A clear definition of giftedness has long eluded the field (Gagné, 2004a, 2004b; Kerr, 2003; Moon, 2003; Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998; Robson & Moseley, 2005; Sternberg, 1986), with a range of definitions emerging at any one time. Intelligence or cognitive ability was a consistent attribute across the definitions of giftedness in the literature (Gagné, 1995, 2004b, 2009; Morelock, 1996; Renzulli, 2002; Tannenbaum, 2003). Other identifiable attributes reflected the broadening understanding of intelligence as a multi-faceted entity (Gardner, 1993; Sternberg, 1986, 1996). Current views define intelligence as the “ability to understand complex ideas, to adapt effectively to the environment, to learn from experience, [and] to engage in various forms of reasoning to overcome obstacles by taking thought” (Neisser et al., 1996, in Nettelbeck & Wilson, 2005, p. 610).

A second consistent attribute was that of potential, defined by Hollingworth (1927) as an inborn capacity for achievement, even though the measurement of potential could be problematic (Jarvis, 2009). Further related characteristics included intrapersonal attributes such as motivation, creativity, persistence, rarity and productivity, and external factors including environment, societal value and the discovery of domains of interest. Current definitions highlight interactivity between various components that are seen in behaviour and cognitive processing, as evidenced in individuals’ behaviours or responses to stimuli or opportunity (see, for example, Naglieri &

Kaufman, 2000; Renzulli, 2011; Subotnik, 2003; Sternberg & Zhang, 1998; Tannenbaum, 2003; Winner, 1996).

2.3.2 Giftedness in Education

Addressing giftedness in education settings continued to confound the education field. This was reflected in the multiple attempts to define it conclusively to support provisions and programs. Worrell and Erwin (2011) synthesised the wider literature and contextualised the need for a definition in an education setting, where identification of the gifted child is essential for programming and planning. They acknowledged the move to a more comprehensive acceptance of giftedness as being domain specific, variable across time, while concurrently considering individuals as unique in their needs.

Grant and Piechowski (1999) suggested that the field of gifted education was plagued by a seminal problem of definition and approach. Morelock (1996) had identified two approaches to giftedness evident in the literature; the two approaches were an ongoing source of tension. Some considered the gifted individual (Columbus Group, 1991; Delisle, 2003; Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994; Gross, 2004; Roeper, 2003; Silverman, 1995; Winner, 1996), while others considered what the gifted individual achieved (Gardner, 1993; Matthews & Foster, 2005; Renzulli, 1986; Reis, 1998; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Sternberg, 1986; Worrell & Erwin, 2011).

The development of the whole child was an essential consideration for work with young gifted individuals in order to support their growth towards self-actualisation (Columbus Group, 1991; Delisle, 2003; Grant & Piechowski, 1999; Hollingworth, 1927; Silverman, 1995, 2009). This stance focused on identity, social-emotional development and the lived experience of giftedness, and was described as the gifted child strand (Morelock, 1996). It identified that gifted young people were qualitatively different to their peers, and had different inner processes of thought and response. They viewed the world differently and experienced daily life more intensely. Silverman (2009) described the intensity and depth of responses to stimuli observed in gifted individuals and the impact of such depth on personality development and capacity to manage life. For Silverman (2009), the fundamental

theory that supports the best understanding of giftedness is Dabrowski's (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration. Her work with many gifted students over an extended period of time reinforced, for her, his conclusions. For those who believed in the importance of self-understanding to achieve potential, Dabrowski provided insight into the 'rich complex, turbulent' (Silverman, 2009) inner world of the gifted. Focusing on holistic development included an emphasis on uniqueness and life skills, and on the need for self-understanding to fully reach potential. For this group, the definition of giftedness had to acknowledge personality, responses to experiences, and levels of emotional understanding and response. Giftedness was indicated by an intense emotional response to the environment and a clear sense of personal difference. Developing personal identity as a gifted person, as well as deep personal understanding, should therefore be a focus of education (Columbus Group, 1991; Gottfried et al., 1994; Grant & Piechowski, 1999; Roeper, 2003; Silverman, 1998). The view that it was "not simply what one does, it is who one is" (Delisle, 2003, p. 13) linked giftedness to identity and a sense of self, and an ongoing process of realisation, that continued to impact on the lives of young people as they matured (Delisle, 2003).

An alternate line of research proposed that giftedness equated to achievement (Gardner, 1993; Matthews & Foster, 2005; Reis, 1998; Renzulli, 1986; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Sternberg, 1996; Worrell & Erwin, 2011). This approach saw giftedness as determined by what one could do and produce. It was dependent on a defined level of ability, and a set of contributing interactive factors that combined to support the development of talented performance. The developmental process was one where elements of natural ability and environmental influence blended, enabling the individual to achieve in one or multiple domains of demonstrated ability (Jarvis, 2009). There was a need to consider observable strengths and abilities (Matthews & Foster, 2005), and by understanding the progress from novice to expert, develop talent potential. Renzulli (1986) had earlier described it as productive giftedness, which resulted in tangible evidence of high ability in the behaviours and products of the gifted person. Boykin (2000) argued for a focus on gifted achievement to enable the identification of those who were able to reach high levels of success in various domains, both inside and outside the academic environment. Giftedness was a

precursor to particular talents that emerged in a range of fields of endeavour over time and through specific training or skill development, resulting in young people achieving their potential.

Grant and Piechowski (1999) expressed concern that this view placed undue pressure on young people to perform, and was antithetical to self-actualisation. They found it problematic that the individual became less important than the product, and that providing for giftedness in such a way led to a lack of motivation and personal satisfaction, which challenged child-centred views of development. A middle view was raised by Dai and Renzulli (2000), who also argued that the dichotomous approach to the development of gifted young people was problematic, and suggested that, when discussing giftedness and young people, a conceptual framework that integrated both intrapersonal capacities and technical capacities was essential. Their proposition was that the process of talent development included both the young person's interests and strengths, and a focus on specific skills and capacities that enabled the achievement of self-actualisation which, in turn, allowed for the full expression of talent. Taking up such a proposition would lead to an approach to talent development that focused on both the holistic development of the gifted young person, leading to a sense of identity and a sense of purpose, and their domain-specific capacities, which reflected their innate potential in a field of endeavour. The perspective of Dai and Renzulli (2000) reflected the conceptual approach of this research and the definition of giftedness that had informed the author's work for an extended period of time. Giftedness is potential that will be recognised in talented performance that has been supported not only by specific instruction and experience, but also by ongoing inner growth and fulfilment as an individual. There are some talent models described in the literature that suggest a process of support and opportunity that leads to the achievement of high levels of performance in a variety of domains.

2.4 Talent Development

In 1985, Bloom's research into talent development provided a detailed retrospective description of the childhood and adolescent experiences of 120 highly talented individuals, in young adulthood, in three domains of endeavour: aesthetic, athletic and

intellectual. Participants were identified through a set of criteria that acknowledged the expectations of the specific field, and public recognition in the field. The individuals, and their families where possible, were interviewed to learn about childhood experiences that contributed to their achievements, including learning, relationships and activity. While this is a seminal model of talent development, studied with a large number of individuals in diverse areas of talented performance, it is based in one cultural context, to reduce confounding factors of geographical culture (Bloom, 1985). Bloom acknowledged that the selection methods may have missed some possible participants, and that others declined involvement.

During adolescence the particular needs for talent development that Bloom identified included access to specialist teachers or models, strong family support, few distractions from the focus developmental pathway, practice to achieve perfection, an affinity for hard work and a sense of satisfaction from the results of hard work. Bloom considered multiple factors that impacted on talent development from a young age to early adulthood. The innate potential these individuals began with was not a major consideration in his final conclusion. It is interesting to note, though, that across the participants' lived experience, their capacity to learn easily and well, especially in the middle years, was a factor in their developmental process. However, also salient is their personal commitment to improvement and their preparedness to practise and to prioritise this over other typical activities of adolescence. Bloom's theory of talent development acknowledged the place of both the inner person and the evidence of achievement in highly talented individuals and there is similarity in the factors and processes in models that came after his seminal work on talent development.

Subsequent literature described a number of talent development models that built on the work of Bloom (Gagné, 2004b, 2009; Kerr & Larson, 2007; Matthews & Foster, 2005; Moon, 2003; Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999; Piirto, 2000; Reis, 1998; Sternberg & Zhang, 1995, 1998; Tannenbaum, 2003; Wu, 2005). Across these models of talent development there was a consistent view that multiple factors, both internal and external, contributed to the development of talent. Personal attributes that supported talent development were identified as commitment, motivation, ability and creativity. Consistent environmental influences included family, peers and milieu.

Interestingly, Wu (2005) found that for Chinese teachers, the level of innate ability was not an essential facet of planning for talent development. Even though he placed greater emphasis on the environmental impact of the school, his method of data collection may have contributed to this as he gathered his information from a small sample of high school teachers. However, it is important to note that some of the elements are the same across cultural settings.

Moon (2003) focused on personal talent, identifying specific intrapersonal attributes that enable the development of overall talent. By considering individuals who demonstrated success and achieved their goals she identified salient influences on an individual including personality characteristics that allow such success. For Moon, talent development began with a strong sense of self, knowing one's weaknesses and strengths and having the resilience to meet challenges and overcome them. Moon also identified the impact of environment on talent development, considering the role of tacit knowledge of context, as well as the importance of knowledge about fields of human endeavour and possible areas for development in enabling an individual to fully realise their talent potential. Talent development was a reflection of disposition, similar to the intrapersonal catalysts described by Gagné (1995, 2004b, 2009) and the personal attributes listed by Reis (1998).

The Piirto Pyramid Framework (2000) described both the intrapersonal and environmental factors that supported talent and contributed to its ongoing development. In her model, genetic, emotional and cognitive aspects of an individual's temperament were supported by environmental factors, including gender, culture, school, home and chance events. These factors combined with the intrapersonal aspects to contribute to talent development. For Piirto, talent is innate, but not enough in itself. Talent development happened as a result of a drive to achieve, a passion for an area of expertise and a commitment to practice and ongoing improvement in the area. It was interesting that gender was indicated as an environmental influence, but also a genetic influence. More investigation was required to understand the interaction between environment and gender in terms of talent development (Piirto, 2000).

While the various models clearly described sets of elements that contributed to talent development, few of them outlined a specific process of development. Tannenbaum (2003) described a meshing together of the factors, and Sternberg and Zhang (1995, 1998) suggested an interaction of the factors occurred, but in most models there is no definitive description of the process of talent development. Moon (2003) explained the transition from novice to talented individual as a personal trajectory that indicated the uniqueness of talent development. The model of Gagné (2002, 2009) described a detailed process of development from giftedness to talented performance. His model is the most widely known and accepted model of talent development in education in Australia at the current time. This model has shaped the theoretical framework for this research, providing a set of perspectives with which to analyse the data.

2.4.1 The Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent

The Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (Gagné, 1995) provided the clear pathway between giftedness and talent which had been problematic in the functionality of definitions of giftedness. The original DMGT (1985) explained the development of talent as a process that began with a level of natural ability, and noted the impact of various environmental catalysts as well as aspects of the individual's personality (intrapersonal catalysts) on the development of talent. Gagné suggested that talent development could be clearly described as a process involving activities, progress and investment but that it began with a level of innate ability, in any one of four domains. During the developmental process a number of catalysts had either a positive or negative impact on the emergence of talent. Chance events, encounters and opportunities that cannot be planned for or predicted are represented by the inclusion of the 'chance' box, linked to all other catalysts within the model. The model can be interpreted to combine both the notion of the gifted child and that of the gifted achiever, as the intrapersonal catalysts reflected the inner processes of the individual, namely mental and physical health, motivation and self-management. DMGT 2.0 (Gagné, 2008) (see Fig. 2.1), showed an important change as it recognised the impact the individual had on his/her environment, and partly overlapped the intrapersonal catalysts and the environmental catalysts, acknowledging the filtering effect of the individual. Any person makes choices about the opportunities he/she is exposed to and personal interests, values and responses alter the power of the environmental catalysts in talent development. This highlighted and echoed the literature that

focused on the gifted individual and the importance of knowing and understanding self in the development of talent. However, the model also continued to highlight that the environment is instrumental in supporting or constraining talent development. Elements in the environment such as context, school, family or culture provide opportunity and experience that contribute to the process of developing talent. The recent version presents a perspective that highlights the importance of identity and self-understanding, for it appears that having a sense of self will change the impact of the environment on the development of talent.

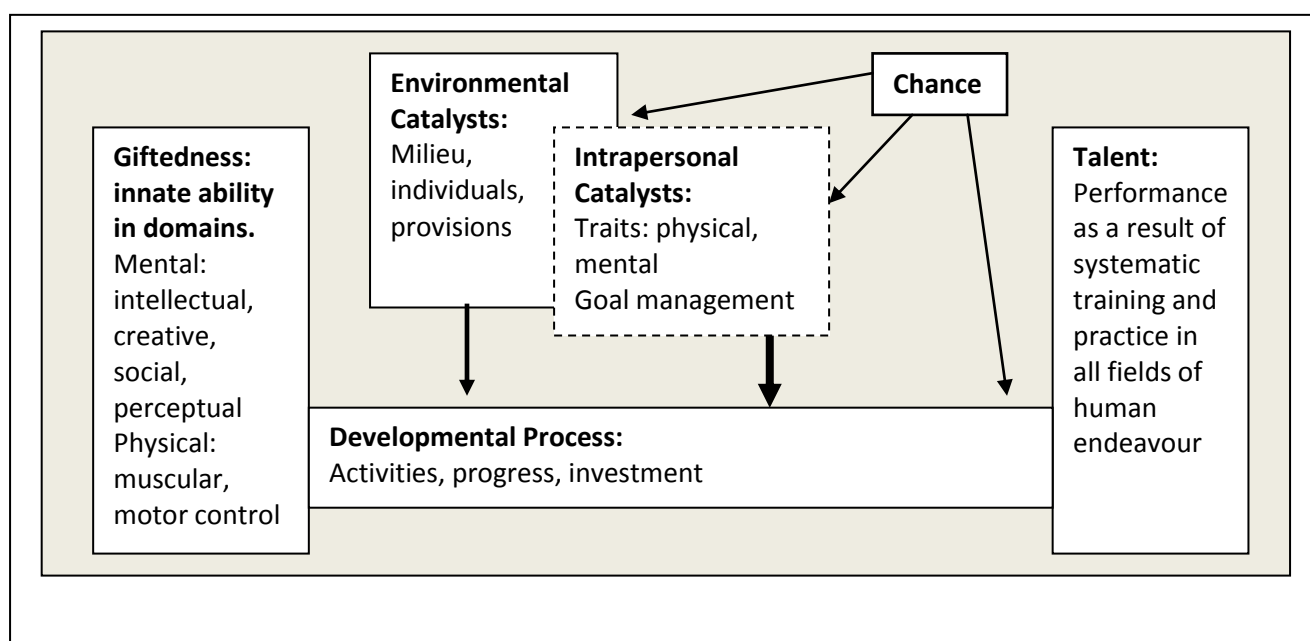


Figure 2.1: Simplified diagram of the DMGT (Gagné 2008)

Gagné's model does not differentiate the process of talent development for male or female individuals, and does not specifically mention popular culture and its influence on the developmental process. For this research, this is a limitation of the model as an explanation for talent development, although the model itself provides a framework that allows for an examination of the lived experiences of a group of gifted Australian adolescent girls as they described their responses to popular culture. In the parlance of Gagné's DMGT 2.0, popular culture will be considered an environmental catalyst, along with the environmental factors of home, family, school and milieu. There are other models of talent development that can be considered alongside the DMGT 2.0, which focus on talent development for girls and women. These both reflect and enhance the process outlined by Gagné, enriching the understanding of talent

development for girls, whose experience is framed by the way their context positions them.

2.4.2 Talent Development of Women

Kerr and Larson (2007) discussed the process of talent development for women as described in the work of Terman and Oden (1935) and the earlier work of Kerr (1985, 1997). Both these earlier studies considered the lives of eminent women, gathering information about their experiences and opportunities, and their responses to life circumstances. The development of talent in women did not emerge as an important focus until the 1970s (Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Kerr & Larson, 2007) because it was assumed that it was the high level of social standing experienced by most of the girls in Terman's study that enabled them to become successful. It was also assumed that women were not as capable as men and more interested in nurturing than learning. Because such a small number of women reach eminence compared to men, Kerr and Larson believed that there had not been enough women to study well. A number of factors were identified that contributed to the development of eminence in women. Key factors in talent development for girls were recognised as an early loss of a parent, which resulted in a sense of independence and adult responsibility; a connection with a master teacher for both content and intrapersonal skills; and an early passion and curiosity for a particular field, resulting in practice and focused learning. Other factors included parents who were prepared to ignore stereotyped expectations, times of being alone, a strong sense of identity for a career and of self, capacity to stand against peer expectation and resist stereotype expectations, and a low interest in the culture of romance (Kerr & Larson, 2007), whereby girls seek to find a mate and focus on personal appearance and particular behaviour. They also described successful talent development for girls as requiring a personal disposition of courage, and an ability to develop equitable gender relationships. Finally it is important to be in love with an idea as this can be the driving force in talent development. The work of Kerr and Larson did not outline a process or highlight any disparity in significance among the factors, but rather focused on the intrapersonal attributes that girls needed. This model of talent development does focus on girls, and suggests elements that impact on growth.

Reis (1998) is well known for her work in the area of gifted women and girls and underachievement. Over a long period her research focused on the lives of gifted women and girls, using retrospective study with successful talented women. From this research she developed a model that outlined the socio-cultural influences females face (Reis, 1998). In follow-up writing, Reis confirmed that there were both internal and external factors that contributed to girls' success (Reis, 2001, 2002, 2003). Her work identified that a salient attribute in successful talent development was a strong desire to develop one's talent, defining this as the key driver behind talent realisation in women. Internal factors included ability and personality, with some similarities to the intrapersonal catalysts presented by Gagné (2004b, 2008, 2009). External to the individual were factors in the environment, which included people, time and opportunity. Where her model differed markedly from the DMGT 2.0 (Gagné, 2008) was in the final factor that impacted on the drive to realisation: that of having a perception that one's talent had value. All the women in Reis's study perceived a purpose in their lives and felt their work was critical. The achievement of their talent was essential to their life satisfaction and they felt it important to contribute in some way to their world. Such a higher order concept was not represented clearly in the DMGT 2.0 and perhaps represented the perceived difference between men and women in terms of social connections and values (Gilligan, 1982). Reis did not suggest a transition from girlhood to successful womanhood in her model, but rather provided an illustration of the factors that contributed to the realisation of talent.

Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1999) also used stories of successful women to distil the elements that generated talent development in successful women. Their model, as others, did not outline a process of development but provided a set of factors that contributed to the final actualisation of talent. Beginning with the individual, the first set of factors included demographic elements that related to the social position and geographical location of the women as well as the access to resources that these allowed. At the same level of the model were individual factors such as personality and family aspects. Acknowledging some of the barriers for women in developing talent, the model also listed protective factors as an influence on talent development, explaining these as the strategies that women developed to cope with the societal pressures that make it difficult for women to achieve. Resilience, independence,

sensitivity, personal mental health care and trust in one's own beliefs were listed as some of the strategies women used. The first set of factors then intersected with a second set which included opportunities and talent domains. Similarly to other models, these second factors were about experiences, work-related activity, specific skill development, mentors and resources. These acted as a filter to develop the raw talent of the individual and were acted upon by women who wanted to achieve talent realisation. Noble et al. (1999) described a unique view of the end result of talent development, and suggested that women could demonstrate their talent in either of two spheres: private or public. In this way the model valued those women who, rather than achieve in highly exposed areas of eminence, actually achieved at a local or community level. While these were not standard measures of achievement, it suggested that the contribution women make in their own place needed to be also seen in terms of successful talent development. Again, this model listed factors that contributed to talent development but did not show how the connections were supported or developed. At times the terms 'gifted' and 'talented' were used interchangeably and there was not a clear distinction between giftedness and talent. It did have a different perspective, however, as it highlighted the choices women make and it valued these choices.

Understanding the talent development process is important when considering ways to enhance achievement and success for gifted adolescent girls. Talent development better informs education than the elusive notion of potential and the mysterious concept of giftedness (Matthews & Foster, 2005), even though it presented a problem of performance that could inhibit some gifted individuals from self-actualisation (Dai & Renzulli, 2000). The literature on talent development recognised specific attributes and processes that could be isolated in the behaviours and responses of those who showed aptitude in a range of areas. However, it cannot be considered as removed from the ongoing growth of the individual, or the need for opportunity to move towards self-actualisation without the pressure of performance for external acknowledgement. Studies of talent development were retrospective, using lived experiences as recalled by adults who had successfully reached a place of public recognition for their talent in their own, and global, cultural settings. The models described in this review reinforced the argument of Dai and Renzulli (2000) that for

young people, talent development must focus concurrently on both specific talent performance and personal growth and understanding. Those who were, in life, most successful among the many participants over the various studies were both skilled and emotionally secure, with a strong sense of self and purpose. However, it was also clear that the impact of gender on the process was not venerated in key models of talent development. Models devised by women recognised barriers and challenges in the lives of women, and were derived from specific exploration of the lived experience of successful women who had achieved eminence in their fields. The lack of highly talented women, recognised across multiple platforms of endeavour, has made this difficult while at the same time displayed this very problem.

Gagné's DMGT 2.0 (2008, 2009), despite being non-gender focused, remained useful as a theoretical framework for this research, because it enabled a breakdown of the various influences on gifted adolescent girls in Australian settings, and it was the current model that informed educational practice in Australian schools. It provided a suggested structure for the process of enacting talent development, alongside the various factors that impacted on the process. However, it was problematic because of its non-gender construction and the fact that it did not acknowledge the ongoing and pervasive impacts on girls during adolescence that position them in ways that constrain both their personal and their talent development. Gagné's DMGT 2.0 could be read so that the sense of personal identity held by gifted girls filtered the impact of social attitudes towards women. The various female-specific attributes from the range of gender specific models described (Kerr & Larson, 2007; Noble et al., 1999; Reis, 1998) could be overlaid on the DMGT 2.0 to more clearly define the personal attributes needed by women to overcome the still-existing barriers to full talent development. The models described were all set in American contexts but Kronborg (2008, 2009) studied Australian eminent women, and identified similar salient influences and experiences in their lives that had supported their talent development. Her findings aligned with the earlier work. Key developmental influences were family allies (Kronborg, 2008) and passion for the talent domain (Kronborg, 2009) as important in the talent development process.

This research considered the presentation of gender in popular culture, through the lens of two case study groups of adolescent gifted girls, as an environmental catalyst in the talent development of young women.

2.5 Gifted Girls

Gifted individuals experience life in a different way to their non-gifted peers, and have been the focus of many studies of academic development, socio-affective development and emotional development (Betts & Neihart, 1988; Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 1999; Dederick, Dederick, & Zalk, 1977; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Hollingworth, 1927; Olszewski-Kubilius & Turner, 2002; Plucker & Stocking, 2001; Renzulli, 1986; Terman, 1925; Vialle et al., 2007). Gifted girls are a sub-group within the general population of gifted individuals and have been under-studied (Reis, 1995; Noble, 1987, 1992; Silverman, 1995), leaving a gap in the understanding of their lived experience. Many of the existing seminal studies of gifted girls are retrospective studies, using case study approaches that build profiles of successful adult women identified as gifted, or follow up studies of women identified as gifted while still in school, whether they were successful in later life or not (Kaufmann, 1981; Kerr & Larson, 2007; Noble, 1992; Reis, 1998, 2003; Rimm, Kaufman, & Rimm, 1999; Silverman, 1996). Their giftedness was assumed to become evident as talent or eminence, thus taking up the 'giftedness as product' perspective and leading to the development of models of talent development, which, despite the perceived import of their authors, were not utilised as frameworks for studying the development of gifted girls in the broader literature. The need to examine giftedness, its impact on adolescent girls and their personal development was discussed by a number of authors (Henderson, 2006; Kaufmann, 1981; Pipher, 1994; Romey, 2007; Smutny, 2007, Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007), but most frequently the literature on gifted girls focused on their abilities in maths and science, and their academic achievements compared to gifted males. Pressure on young girls in the current societal environment to achieve holistically but with particular emphasis on appearance and relationships added to the dilemma of the academically able girl (Pipher, 1994; Robbins, 2006).

The lived experiences of Australian gifted girls was not detailed in literature although it was clearly indicated that being gifted could create a challenge for girls in terms of

their identity, their relationships and their achievements (Eddles-Hirsch, 2006; Galitis, 2009; Lee, 2000). Lee (2000) described perspectives held by Australian teachers in early childhood settings, whose views and ideas about gifted girls had developed over teaching careers that spanned a variety of settings. Galitis (2009) presented a case study of a single school and its provision in one state in Australia, and argued that traditional views of academic ability being a male trait remained the dominant paradigm in Australia, confirming the ideas suggested by Eddles-Hirsch (2006). Both the family and school environment can inadvertently contribute to this challenge by the reinforcement of traditional views of the role of women, their careers and their purpose at times when career decisions and aspirations are formed (Lea-Wood, 2004; Lysaght & Vialle, 1998). Gifted girls in rural settings are shown in older literature to experience increased challenges in these areas (Amodeo, 1982; Kleinsasser, 1988; Lamb & Daniels, 1993), but more recent Australian literature has not investigated this to a great extent. This is addressed here as one of the issues of talent development.

This section of the chapter is framed around the catalysts in Gagné's DMGT (2008). Gagné described the interaction of the various elements towards the achievement of talent potential as an individual choreography for each gifted person. In the DMGT 2.0 (Gagné, 2008), the environmental catalysts are filtered by intrapersonal catalysts, thus reinforcing the importance of personal attributes in talent development. Deep understanding of self was identified by Hollingworth (1927), Silverman (1995, 2005) and Roeper (2003) as essential for the development of self-actualising talent, and in the talent development models that inform this research (Kerr & Larson, 2007; Moon, 2003; Noble et al., 1999; Reis, 1998) it is described as indicative of the development of eminent women. The intrapersonal catalysts include identity, motivation and self-confidence, and aspiration, which are issues that can also be extrapolated from the literature that examined the school achievement and career planning of gifted girls. Environmental catalysts that appeared in the literature and warranted deeper consideration here included school life and rurality.

2.5.1 Identity

Having a strong sense of self is one of the intrapersonal catalysts within Gagné's model of talent development. Establishing a personal identity is one of the key socio-emotional tasks of adolescence. A complex and multi-faceted task, forming an

identity involves exploration and experimentation, and times of fluctuating confidence and emotion (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Marcia, 1966; Pipher, 1994). Erikson's theory of identity development (1968) defined adolescence as the time when an individual resolved the conflict between identity and role confusion. Social relationships offered key opportunities for the exploration of different viewpoints and ideas. There would be times of both dissonance and consistency with the views and values of family or peers. Belenky et al. (1986) talked about the silent mode in which many girls carried their identity, appearing to conform with that created for them by others while maintaining an inner sense of self that differed. Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino, & Portes (1995) engaged 82 gifted adolescents (39 were female) in a research study to confirm that the types of identity issues suggested by Erikson in his theoretical work were evident in young people. The adolescent participants displayed, as predicted, low ego strength, fluctuations of personality traits and a tendency towards personal confusion and mood swings. Unfortunately, the differences between males and females were not reported in the study, although the results confirmed that the process of identity development had an impact on the personality and confidence of all adolescents which was more marked in gifted young people.

Gender plays a part in identity development. It forms not only the core of personal knowledge, understanding and expectation but it is also the source of prescribed societal identity, whereby particular roles, interests, skills, gestures and activities are assigned to an individual because of physical attributes (Formanek, 1982). There were indications in the literature that gender issues in identity development had not necessarily changed over time for girls in terms of the place of relationships in their identity development, and in the way they were positioned through ascribed roles. Douvan and Adelson (1966) noted that a girl's identity was constructed around relationships (particularly a husband) whereas a boy's identity was constructed around vocational choice. Gilligan (1992) agreed, suggesting that the need for girls to remain connected with females was trivialised and that identity theories such as Erikson's implied that a girl could not fully form her identity unless she was in a heterosexual relationship. More recently, both Gross (1989, 2004) and Robbins (2006) found that

adolescent gifted girls felt forced to choose between being true to self and fitting in with the group.

Young people seek to separate themselves from their family and deliberately create an identity that reflects who they see themselves as both being and becoming. It is a conscious process of trying on different persona, becoming aware of social and cultural contexts that shape self-perception and action, and finally “determining who one is and ... deciding who one will be” (Moshman, 2005, p. 79). The relationship between the commitment and the exploration facets of identity formation were examined in a group of college students, predominantly female, by Luyckx et al. (2006). Their work highlighted the cyclical nature of identity formation and the connections between the two aspects. The most significant finding of their work for this research was that the process of identity formation to the mature identity originally defined by Marcia (1966) as a commitment to vocation, sexuality, and religious or political ideologies, was ongoing and continuous, even into college and early adulthood. Because the majority of their participants were female this reinforced that identity formation for females was a long-term, dynamic process requiring a range of experiences and connections to reach stability, and so the adolescent girl in high school may well be a long way from establishing her identity. This was despite Erikson’s seminal definition of adolescence as the period between 13 to 18 years of age but was reinforced in the work around women and self-actualisation by Kerr and Larson (2007), Reis (2001; 2002) and Piirto (2000).

Interestingly, the issues for identity formation for girls discussed by Douvan and Adelson in 1966 appeared to remain pertinent to the girls of today. Girls were more likely to take on a stereotyped identity and not achieve self-actualisation until later years. The girls who were the focus of Douvan and Adelson’s (1966) research were not expected to have a career; work was a social choice. They did not aspire to fame or success. In the study, middle class girls took fewer risks than lower class girls, who sought to improve their social standing by establishing an identity in a higher social position. In contrast, using data from a larger recent study, Walshaw (2006) reported a small exploration of the experiences of four young girls in New Zealand: two from a working class home environment and two from a middle class environment. She

noted that, despite the working class mothers having high expectations for their daughters, the girls' ascribed identities reflected the values of the community and met their expectations, regardless of their evident vision of themselves in the future. The two middle class girls were more able to imagine having control of their future identities, and were positioned by their families in that identity. The forty-year time difference between the studies highlights the change in social expectation for young girls. However, in both examples, the girls formed friendships that gave them a chance to mirror, test and challenge their view of self, and it was recognised that they changed their identity behaviours to suit the needs of the group they were with. There was a sense that girls sought friendships with like minds, perhaps to clarify or at least confirm appropriate behaviours and roles that would meet with social acceptance. Lea-Wood (2004) posited that key influences on a gifted girl's identity continue to include family, friends and society in general, including the media.

In 1994, Pipher published what has become a seminal popular text on the development of all girls, although she discussed the difference for strong girls who she equated to being talented and intelligent. She identified that key feminist writers, for example, de Beauvoir, Friedan, Gilligan, hooks and Walkerdine, described adolescence as a time of trial for young females and that they highlighted a number of strengths important for young girls as they explored identity. These key strengths were listed as being able to resist cultural pressures, valuing self as an individual, maintaining close relationships with family and long-term friends, and being aware of their unique identities. Douvan and Adelson (1966) determined that there were three types of identity that girls may take on. The first, normative identity, was socially approved and well defined, and matched the expectations of family and social setting. It provided girls with ways to behave and respond that would meet with approval, thus giving clear direction for how to be. A second type of identity was the ascribed identity given to an individual from certain groups within the cultural context. There was an amount of pressure to live up to this ascribed identity and not deviate from it without creating some challenge. Finally, an individual may choose to take on a negative identity—a deviant choice—opposite to expectations with the intent of expressing difference.

Each of these choices placed different pressures on the individual. For girls who were recognised as more compliant and focused on meeting the approval of others, it can be seen that they may be restrained in their personal development by the identities ascribed to them and the expectations of those around them. Individuals were therefore defined in their context by labels given because of their behaviours. For example, in Robbins' (2006) study of a group of eight 'overachievers' (four girls), there was evidence that ascribed identities related to academic performance and achievement placed young, gifted girls under enormous pressure. The labels given to the girls in her study illustrated this: *the superstar*, *the perfectionist*, *the flirt* and *the popular girl*. Each label denoted a way of behaving that the particular girl felt obliged to live up to and that impacted on her sense of self when she could not achieve the role. Renold and Allan (2006) also found that girls were labelled according to their behaviour and performance in school, noting that the label impacted on their choices in terms of achievement. Using only three girls from a larger study, they described the way that the girls, in Year 5 in two English schools, made a deliberate choice to fit a label of either feminine or clever depending on their personal need for belonging, and the influence of their family. Despite this being a small study, it highlighted the way that young girls attempt to balance their ability with the acceptable ways of being girl in their environment. Popular culture, with its emphasis on success and appearance, also placed huge pressure on young girls to be of a certain appearance and manner (Douván & Adelson, 1966; Harris, 2004a; 2004b). The positioning of young girls by an external agent made the quest for identity achievement difficult and placed pressure on girls to fit an image rather than be themselves (Renold & Allan, 2006; Smutny, 1999; 2007; Walkerdine, 1990). Pipher (1994) noted the impact of having a talent on self-confidence, and that having a purpose outside of oneself could contribute to a stronger sense of self. This was also noted in the work of Reis (1998, 2001) and Kerr and Larson (2007).

The formation of a personal identity is a task of adolescence (Capper, Foust, Callahan, & Albaugh, 2009) and is impacted on by the environment and the personality of the individual. Vialle et al. (2007) identified that in this task, there was more similarity than difference between gifted and non-gifted adolescents. Over the time of adolescence, young gifted girls will seek to explore ways to be and will learn to

accept who they are and what their potential is, although evidence indicates that for gifted girls this may not come to fruition until much later in life (Piirto, 1991; Reis, 1998; Tirri & Ubani, 2005). The state of diffusion that then can be assumed as the normal state of existence for gifted girls suggests an increased susceptibility to suggestion and ideas from external forces. Indeed, it appears from the literature that a girl shapes her identity around interpersonal connections and communication, seeking love, acceptance and support from others and shaping her behaviour through signals from those around her (Kramer, 1991). Evidently, this is a dilemma for young gifted girls who may place themselves in a difficult position, creating separate identities for their different contexts, resulting in internal conflict (Fiebig, 1998). In terms of Gagné's DMGT 2.0 (2008, 2009), where identity can be seen as an intrapersonal catalyst, identity confusion may result in a negative impact on other intrapersonal catalysts, and skew the influence of environmental catalysts on the final achievement of talent potential.

2.5.2 Motivation and Self-Confidence

As an individual strives to achieve success in an area of talent, personal motivation and confidence impact on their effort. The developmental process that leads to talent development described in Gagné's DMGT 2.0 (2008, 2009) is a composite of practice, time and investment, influenced by the intrapersonal facets of an individual's makeup. A positive self-concept supports and enables an individual to meet challenges and take risks in thinking and dreaming, thus achieving highly in an area of talent (Flood, 2001). However, Kline and Short (1991) clearly showed in their study of 89 gifted girls across the span of high school education, that over time, gifted girls had a definite decrease in their self-assurance and confidence. These girls became increasingly vulnerable to criticism, to perfectionism and to feelings of hopelessness. Kline and Short argued the importance of supporting gifted girls to better understand their abilities and potential before they reached adolescence. Studies by Marshall, Gardiner, and Grealy (2004) and Lea-Wood and Clunies-Ross (1995) identified the increasing incidence of perfectionism and lower self-esteem evident in gifted girls over their time in Australian secondary schools, although Lea-Wood and Clunies-Ross acknowledged a need for further study to explore how significant this is. However, there was evidence across a wide range of literature that clearly described the drop in self-esteem experienced by gifted girls over adolescence (Goldsmith,

1987; Klein & Zehms, 1996; Kramer, 1991; Nelson & Smith, 2001; Reis, 2002; Ryan, 1999; Schober, Reimann, & Wagner, 2004).

Pipher (1994) presented a strong case for the decline of girls' self-concept and raised many concerns about what happened to the self-esteem and personal efficacy of adolescent girls, whether gifted or non-gifted. The girls experienced anxiety about their appearance, their place and their futures in a culture "(that) has always smacked girls on the head in early adolescence" (p. 23). She expressed concern that society continued to hold lower expectations for girls. Her argument centred on the concept that girls stopped fighting for themselves as they moved through adolescence and took on the expectations and aspirations ascribed to them. Her work did not have a specific focus on gifted girls, though ability and its resultant isolation, or at least apartness from peers, is seen as one of the strengths that enables gifted girls to achieve their personal aspirations. However, the finding that lower expectations were held for gifted girls is evident in a variety of other sources (Baruch, 1975; Kline & Short, 1991; Kramer, 1991; Reis, 2001, 2002; Ryan, 1999). In a study that contradicted these findings, Siegle and Reis (1998) found that teachers held similar expectations for boys and girls in the area of mathematics and higher expectations for girls in the language arts. It was the girls who held lower expectations for themselves in the classroom. However, this study emphasised the importance of strong self-concept as a factor in aspiration towards academic success in a discipline, for it was the self-perception of ability that kept the girls engaged with higher mathematics and science. It appeared that for gifted girls, the aspiration to achieve well academically was closely tied to their sense of self.

Finding a balance between individual drive and the need to connect to others socially is one of the challenges for gifted girls (Mann, 1994). Despite the opportunities that girls have to set different pathways for themselves (Henderson, 2006; Klein & Zehms, 1996; Nelson & Smith, 2001; Sanders & Munford, 2008; Walshaw, 2006), an expectation still exists that girls will undertake traditional roles and respond to experience in stereotypical ways (Gilligan, 1982; Mann, 1994; Reis, 2001, 2002; Ryan, 1999). In a large study, Dederick, Dederick, and Zalk (1977) investigated the responses, both academic and social, when an all-girls school became co-educational.

During the time of change, both girls and boys in each year (800 in total) completed an interpersonal value survey, which measured a range of values including support, conformity, recognition, independence, benevolence and leadership. Even though the timing of the survey may have had an impact on the results, there was a noticeable difference between the responses of the gifted female students and the non-gifted female students, in all areas of the survey. The gifted girls valued leadership, independence, recognition and support more highly than other girls, and benevolence and conformity less. Interestingly, while the boys and girls in the first year of high school placed similar value across the aspects, in the older years the most similar value across the genders was that of a high valuing of support. Dederick et al. suggest that this result indicated the pressure all gifted adolescents feel in school, which would possibly have an impact on motivation. Such dependence on support and deference to others eventually leads to a poorer sense of self and de-motivates an individual to attempt new or different learning (Henderson, 2006; Sanders & Munford, 2008; Smutny, 2007; Walshaw, 2006).

Belenky et al. (1986) identified that girls were less confident at expressing their own opinion when with others, and were not confident to shape their learning environment to address their needs. Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Thomson (2012) reviewed literature that, in terms of gifted adolescents, contradicted Belenky's assertion. They reported that literature represented both that gifted students were more able to build positive relationships with peers through articulation of their ideas and views, and that there was also evidence that some gifted young people were not able to do this. Ironically, they noted that research had identified that it was often students who were academically gifted with high linguistic abilities who struggled. They did not identify if there was a gender bias in the findings they reported. Their ensuing study focused on the self-reporting of interpersonal skills by gifted adolescent students. Through online surveys focused on interpersonal competence and peer relationships, 1,526 students who had participated in gifted programs revealed their views. Close to half (47.5%) of these students were female. While the study provided clear evidence that this whole group of gifted participants showed a high level of competence in peer relationships and interpersonal skills, the gifted girls scored more highly on the scales for interpersonal ability, revealing a higher level of sensitivity, interaction and

relationship building. Lee et al. (2012) also clarified that the findings may not be the same for creatively gifted students, or for students who had not experienced any form of acceleration in their education. However, their study suggested that, for some gifted girls, peer relationships and interactions supported the development of a strong, positive self-concept and thus personal motivation.

Henderson's study of gifted women (2006), while small, highlighted the issues for some girls in terms of self-concept and motivation to achieve. Her eight participants were more inclined to attribute their success, their motivation to succeed and their personal view of self as successful, to the influence of others around them including parents and teachers. Similarly, both Walshaw (2006) and Sanders and Munford (2008) found that young girls in New Zealand drew their motivation and sense of self strongly from their community and surrounds. In both studies, despite the community wanting the girls to achieve well, achievement was bounded by tradition and the girls developed their expectations of achievement to meet community expectations. Sanders and Munford (2008) reported on an aspect of a larger study that used interviews and a variety of creative data collection tools, including tasks that required the writing of life stories and imagining the future, to draw out the motivations and aspirations of 27 girls between the ages of 10- and 15-years-old. There were two groups of girls, both living in semi-rural communities and all achieving well at school. The stories that emerged showed the centrality of relationships to the girls' view of self. A timeline activity predicting future achievement identified that, while the girls were motivated to travel and do well, their self-concepts relied on the opinions and ideas of others about what they should do and be. However, there was a sense of the need for personal improvement and a desire for a different future than that of their mothers. As a snapshot in time for these girls, the study recognised that they were aware of possible pathways and had a strong enough sense of self to hope for a different future. It demonstrated that for girls, there is ongoing conflict around their self-image and the messages they receive externally about their gender, their roles and their futures.

Ambrose (2003), in a philosophical exploration of the possible pathways that aspiration opened for individuals, made connections between aspiration and self-

concept, and identified a number of barriers that impacted on motivation to achieve. Sanders and Munford's (2008) study supported his prediction of possible barriers that impacted on the drive of an individual to achieve, including milieu, opportunity and gender. Ambrose predicted that because of the barriers that needed to be overcome by an individual, many of the possible suggested pathways to success would begin with a steep trajectory that would not achieve the expected heights. This would mean individuals floundered, finding themselves unable to meet their personal goals. Personal self-concept would then decline and goals would be set much lower. Despite the theoretical nature of Ambrose's model, this appeared to be the case for the girls in the work of both Walshaw (2006), and Sanders and Munford (2008), as the girls experienced conflicting messages about their possible futures that impacted on their self-concept and motivation.

Self-concept is constructed of a number of dimensions that are independent of each other, indicating that an individual could have high general self-concept but low self-concept in academic domains. This differentiation between aspects of self-esteem is noted in the study by Klein and Zehms (1996). Their study examined the self-concept scores of 104 gifted and 30 non-gifted girls across late primary/early high school years. There was a significant decline across the time span, with a more negative sense of self indicated in behaviour, intellectual and school status and popularity, especially in Year 8. Participants came from one school district and completed a self-assessment questionnaire as a snapshot in time. The authors recognised the limitations of such a small study, which nevertheless supported other research results. By middle adolescence, females (both non-gifted and gifted) are shown to have a greater decline in their self-concept than males (Chan, 2001; Colangelo & Assouline, 1995; Harter, 2006; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Kline & Short, 1991; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Reis, 2002). Reis (2001, 2002), in particular, noted the internal and external impacts on girls' self-concept. Hamachek (1995) connected self-concept with achievement for the general population, noting that achievement both promoted a positive self-concept and was promoted by self-concept, and that it influenced the level of interest in particular facets of success in school life and later adult life. Capper et al. (2009) argued that this was the same for gifted students. The gifted

population is not homogeneous though, and labelling them as such potentially presented an inaccurate picture (Capper et al., 2009; Dixon, Cross, & Adams, 2001). When Capper et al. (2009) undertook a study in a residential enrichment camp, girls were more prepared to be involved than boys (59% of the participants were girls). By using the Harter (2006) self-perception profile appropriate to age, either child or adolescent, they identified that girls saw themselves as lower in areas of sporting ability and appearance compared to boys. Over adolescence, girls' academic self-concept varied, finally appearing as lower in the final grades of school but higher in Grades 8 and 9. Globally, girls' self-worth declined over the seven years of adolescence despite the amount of support currently focused on building girls' self-concept. A slight rise in the final years of school indicated that nearer the time of future decision-making, there may be an increase in self-concept (Capper et al., 2009). Limitations on this study raised questions. Students were not in their usual environment and little information about their experiences as gifted students was known to the researchers. The sample was limited to Caucasian middle class students, who self-reported while attending a camp for gifted adolescents. They were asked to measure themselves against their normal school population at home. Despite a problem with generalisability, it reflected existing literature and confirmed a gender difference in self-concept.

Both Gilligan (1982) and Shepherd (1993) argued that girls' thinking developed differently to that of boys, noting that their thinking was connected to people and emotions, which restricted their aspiration to achieve as they would defer to males or adjust their ideas to align with that of others, in order to preserve a relationship. Gilligan implied that women experienced less freedom around their self-expression and autonomous development as they grew older, while males were able to express their own opinions and establish a personal agenda of development as they aged. Belenky et al. (1986) identified that women approached thinking differently to men, with a clear slant on relationships and connectedness. If this were so, it would impact on how girls set their goals and even think about what it was they wanted to do later in life. The pathways predicted by Ambrose (2003), driven by aspiration, would be evident as they responded to their environment, in which popular culture must be considered. What is in the future for any individual becomes the essence of their

aspirational thinking, whether related to career or future lifestyle as they start to see themselves as separate from their family (Mendez, 2000).

A positive self-concept supports positive motivation, driving the individual to form aspirations for their future. The literature has indicated that gifted girls receive conflicting messages from the environment that influence the strength of their developing self-concept, and their motivation to think towards their future. Ambrose (2003) identified that it is the strength of the individual's desire to improve and their sense of capacity to do so that drives the aspirational goals towards self-fulfilment, and Flood (2001) highlighted the connections between high intellectual ability and inner drive, arguing for attention to the impact of intrapersonal traits, such as those identified in Gagné's intrapersonal catalysts, on aspiration in gifted girls. For women of earlier generations, their chief aspiration and consequent motivation was related to what society expected of them. Evidence shows that many young girls are still positioned in this same way, through the messaging of the environment.

2.5.3 Aspiration

The aspirations of women in earlier generations were influenced by social expectations. Even as girls were able to attend higher education and focus on learning, the message they received from society was that, in the end, their future lay in the home and in being a 'good' housewife (Harvey, 1993). Despite Friedan's (1963) encouragement for women to change their expectations, Belenky et al. (1986) found that girls still expected to be mothers and housewives, even as they balanced this with a career which would not have the same prestige as that of their male partner. Aspirations provide the grounding for decisions about careers and education. Ambrose (2003) identified factors that impact on the aspirations of gifted young people, and others considered those that gifted girls held for themselves (Kelly & Colangelo, 1990; Leung, Connoley, & Scheel, 1994; Mendez, 2000). There were some contradictions evident in the literature. Aspiration can be addressed through three themes that appeared in the literature, described as the conflicting messages from their milieu, the pressure that gifted girls experienced to utilise their abilities, and finally the lack of knowledge about career pathways.

2.5.3.1 Milieu

The career aspirations of girls remain affected by traditional expectations. They are not always made aware that there is a need, or an opportunity, to make conscious decisions when thinking of their futures. Girls find themselves with less choice and decreasing confidence over adolescence as they internalise socialisation processes that encourage them to be less assertive and more compliant with expectations (Gilligan, 1982; Kerr, 1985, 1997; Mann, 1994; Noble et al., 1999; Reis, 1998). Although Gilligan's (1982) work was based on highly educated women and thus perhaps limited in scope, it indicated that, in terms of aspiration, girls in adolescence grew less free in their self-expression and their choices of individual pathways. Girls socialise in groups and place priority on relationships, and some gifted girls will reflect an egalitarian norm to comply with codes of behaviour, imposed by these relationships (Grieve, 1994). They receive conflicting and confusing messages about what they can and cannot do as a career, and even though there is an indication in the literature that they are more flexible and adventurous in their early aspirations, the conflict between this and the expectations of those around them impacts on their final choices (Greene, 2006; Kelly & Colangelo, 1990; Leung, Connoley, & Scheel, 1994; Mendez, 2000; Perrone, 1997). Lea-Wood's Australian study (2004) examined the influences on girls' vocational choices over the period of their high school education and suggested that girls in Australian high schools were influenced largely by their parents, and their school, and that they often felt constricted in their choices because of this. She felt that Australian high schools tended to encourage a clear decision and consistent pathway early in a girl's school career, discouraging flexible thinking about career pathways.

Vermulean and Minor (1998) interviewed women in a cross-sectional study that covered four decades of life after school. Critically, this study included all white women who had attended college and further education, had worked in business or education, but who had all been raised in a rural environment. When young, some had experienced encouragement to go further with their education and careers while others were discouraged. Key influences on their choices were access to information, meeting the expectations of others, time, distance, health and resources. There was, for some, a clear feeling of lack of control over their lives, with decisions being made

to please others, or decisions being made for them, and work conditions were not always supportive. These women identified distinct personal traits that supported their aspirational drive that were more influential than their milieu, and allowed them to achieve. The traits included a sense of autonomy, capacity to manage challenges, a drive for success and a sense of service. An interesting result from this study was the change in women's expectations over the time span. Women who were between 20 to 30 years of age listed their commitments as family, marriage and work, while the older women did not include work. This is an important result when considering the support of aspiration in adolescent gifted girls, despite its affirmation that women still struggle with their choices, as it indicated that work was an essential component of a young woman's life. However, it did not make clear when the participants left their rural environment and how this change of context impacted on their aspiration.

Mann (1994) identified the challenge to girls of balancing their intellectual accomplishment and personal popularity. This balance involved overcoming the need to please others in their environment (Grant et al., 2000; Leung et al., 1994). Freeman (2004) found that girls from low socio-economic backgrounds were more susceptible to societal gender pressures than others as their parents tended to retain traditional views on careers and the need for income. Despite achieving as well as boys in school, the girls in her study still felt some pressure not to aspire to careers in the sciences because they were less feminine, and not the norm. This was reinforced by a lack of role models. She concluded that it was important to acknowledge the strength of cultural influences on the decisions young gifted women make about their career, and to address the fact that these influences continued to restrict the aspirations of young girls towards science careers. There were different views towards the impact of familial employment, with evidence that the mother's level of education and subsequent employment impacted on a girl's view of possible career paths (Heller & Ziegel, 1996; Yee & Eccles, 1988). In an Australian study by Poole, Langan-Foc, and Omodel (1991), the career aspiration of rural girls was impacted by parental status, finances and work satisfaction. While their study concluded that these pressures were different at different times in life, for adolescent girls this combination proved challenging. They also noted the part that media played in the decisions rural girls made about career and future, but did not elaborate on this. Overall, the literature

suggested that for girls, aspiration developed amid conflict and confusion, resulting in pressure on young gifted girls to make choices that either satisfied those around them or were familiar through the presence of role models, rather than taking the risk of making a less traditional choice.

2.5.3.2 Pressure to Utilise Abilities Well

Gifted adolescent girls may feel pressured because of their potential. Grant et al. (2000) followed seven gifted females through school and into their tertiary years. They were all identified early as gifted students, and experienced a school career that offered diverse opportunities in rural settings. Self-reported data were collected over a period of five years, providing longitudinal patterns the girls showed in their aspirational choices. During their school lives all the girls had been involved in extra-curricular activities that gave them broad experiences and skills. They all aspired to further study and to careers that would utilise their abilities. After five years, only one had dropped out of study but the whole group had reduced their expectations and changed direction by either taking on a more creative career or a more traditional one. Most were involved in education or health industries, despite aspiring to a wider range of careers in the initial data collection. One of the issues these gifted young women had was too much choice, because of their multiple talents.

The concept of multi-potentiality emerged a number of times within the literature as an issue for gifted young girls making career decisions (Hollinger, 1991; Kerr & Sodano, 2003; Lea-Wood, 2004; Maxwell, 2007; Willard-Holt, 2008). Gifted girls saw many possibilities for themselves and wanted to achieve well in a variety of areas, but they also felt pressure to use their ability for social good, and felt selfish if they set goals about their own development (Maxwell, 2007). The role of superwoman was imposed upon many gifted girls from early in their teenage lives as they were encouraged to keep their options open without being given skills in making decisions or planning goals (Kerr & Sodano, 2003; Maxwell, 2007). They felt that they were expected to do well at everything they tried, and to take on a range of activities to prove their capabilities. While for the girls in Grant's (2000) study this provided them with multiple skills and strengths, the study does not explain how they coped, or how stressed they became carrying many roles and meeting expectations.

Stress was evident in the description of gifted girls' lives in other sources (Pipher, 1994; Robbins, 2006). Potentially, gifted individuals have access to a diverse career future, as giftedness leads to an assumption of success and achievement (Maxwell, 2007). Many gifted individuals placed high expectations on themselves to be able to achieve well in any area and Maxwell suggested that gifted girls were "especially vulnerable" (p. 1), resulting in indecision about careers. This could lead to continued long-term study, non-aspirational behaviour, lack of focus, fear of failure and poor self-concept. Such adult underachievement in women was described in other literature (Kerr, 1985; Reis, 1998; Reis & Callahan, 1989).

For gifted girls, the multitude of influences on their choices created another dilemma in terms of successful aspiration and achievement (Eccles, 1987). Pressure was applied to only take on prestigious jobs, choosing their career based on ability rather than interest. Willard-Holt (2008) outlined the pathways of two gifted girls who became teachers, one who had chosen the profession despite pressure to do otherwise, with a philanthropic view towards changing the world and continuing her learning. The second case study is pertinent—this older woman had always aspired to teach but was guided initially into engineering and business due to her ability. She entered teaching as an older person, and finally felt successful. Despite only detailing two of the vignettes to make a clear point, the discussion from the complete study raised serious issues of the pressures placed on young gifted girls to not only aspire to a profession that matched their ability but also to aspire to a career that broke with tradition, again because of their ability. Conclusions from this study inferred that gifted girls should be encouraged to choose the career pathway that was personally satisfying, rather than one commensurate with societal expectations for those with ability. The talent development model developed by Noble et al. (1999) indicated that, for women, talent could be manifested in both public and private spaces and Willard-Holt's (2008) work highlighted that supporting the aspirations of gifted girls needed to reflect their interests rather than the expectations of others, wherever the talent would be demonstrated.

Pressure also emerged in terms of successful achievement and how the individual perceived success or failure. Individuals hold a personal theory of ability, including

whether it is fixed or flexible (Assouline, Colangelo, Ihrig, & Forstadt, 2006; Dweck, 1986, 2010). Gifted students attributed their success to both ability and effort but may have attributed failure differently, depending on their view of, and confidence in, their own ability (Ahmavaara & Houston, 2007; Assouline et al., 2006; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Heller & Ziegler, 2001; McNabb, 2003). Assouline et al. (2006) explored the differences between the attributional behaviours of girls and boys in academic work, following earlier work that found there was a gender difference (Cramer & Oshima, 1992; Heller & Ziegler, 2001). The conclusions indicated that, unlike boys, girls tended to attribute success to effort rather than ability and they theorised that perhaps girls recognised that success was about both ability and effort. This contradicted Dweck's (1986) assertion that girls saw ability as fixed, because they perceived that effort could improve their demonstrated ability. It placed more pressure on a girl to work at high effort levels to both demonstrate her ability and maintain a high level of performance. Ahmavaara and Houston (2007) also questioned aspects of Dweck's thinking about girls and their self-confidence and esteem in academic settings, especially in light of the seemingly higher level of academic performance by girls in school settings described by Freeman (2003, 2004). After surveying a large sample of girls and boys in selective and non-selective environments in the United Kingdom, they suggested that the gap was about presentation. Girls were more likely to downplay their ability and performance and so appeared less confident than boys, who expressed their feelings about academic performance with confidence. Girls felt it necessary to outwardly display a mode of behaviour about ability that was different to what they felt internally.

There may well be pressure on girls from many sources to play down their ability and to appear less capable in school settings. This in turn impacts on their aspirations. The dilemma is that if they were being advised to select their career pathway to match their ability while being pressured to not outperform others in the classroom and to present with humility of attitude, there may be a subsequent lowering of aspirations and confidence in challenging situations (Assouline et al., 2006).

2.5.3.3 Career Pathways

Despite many opportunities for career pathways, and choice that is much broader than for their forebears, gifted girls still have difficulty making career decisions and lack knowledge and skill for planning and preparing for later occupations (Eccles, 1987; Lea-Wood, 2004; Mendez & Crawford, 2002; Phelps, 1991). Girls do not have the same exposure to non-traditional careers as boys do, and receive subliminal messages from many sources, including teachers, popular culture, family and community members that restrain their aspirational thinking (Massey, Genhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Mendez & Crawford, 2002). When Sutor, Minyard, and Carter (2001) investigated the ways that adolescents achieved prestige in their school setting, they concluded that for girls, gender socialisation had changed less over time than the expectations for boys, and would thus continue to limit the aspirations of young girls. The achievement of prestige was shown to be more important for boys in a study completed by Mendez and Crawford (2002), where they found that a group of middle school students enrolled in gifted programs showed clear differences in aspiration around the choice of career. The boys aspired to careers that required higher education and were higher in prestige, while the girls tended to express greater interest in nursing and teaching, although there was some evidence of flexibility in the girls' thinking (Mendez & Crawford, 2002). The girls in the group who aspired towards more male-oriented careers worked hard at school and were internally motivated, with high levels of persistence and assertiveness in their characters. These characteristics reflect the intrapersonal catalysts of Gagné's DMGT 2.0 (2008), and appear to be influential on the aspirational planning of gifted girls.

In a comprehensive review of empirical studies focusing on the content of and processes in forming goals, Massey, Genhardt, & Garnefski (2008) identified that across 102 reports of 94 studies undertaken between 1991 and 2007, there was a gender difference in the content of goals and in the process of making goals. Girls tended to put a shorter time span on their goals, and had less interest in lifetime careers than boys. They expressed a greater number of interpersonal aspirations, and saw themselves more often in careers in the arts or humanities. Massey et al. noted the presence of some inconsistencies in the various studies but drew the conclusion that there were distinct gender-based differences in career aspirations.

Poole, Langan-Fox, and Omodel (1991) explored why women chose the careers they did, seeking to find out if career orientation was present in adolescence and when it most influenced the behaviours and responses of young girls. Their work noted that the traditional choices of career were still prevalent and that sex-role socialisation was more important in the choices made than career intent. While young women who were undertaking further study tended to emphasise their career ahead of their current partner, there was clear evidence that, overall, women tend to make choices that reflect traditional values more than men do. Career exploration leading to career choice contributes to the resolution of identity development (Shoffner & Newsome, 2001). A study of 95 girls aged between 13 and 15 years of age, who were identified as gifted, showed a correlation between reaching identity resolution and having a broad knowledge of career options. The study highlighted the importance of gifted girls having a strong sense of their role in terms of home and family, and work. The more strongly a girl understood the way these roles played out in her life, the more easily she could claim her identity, and make choices related to her career pathway. Information about career pathways, about the requisite skills and thinking, about options and alternate pathways, which would support girls developing this understanding, was not provided regularly for gifted girls in schools (Hollinger, 1991; Hollinger & Fleming, 1993; Kerr & Sodano, 2003; Maxwell, 2007; Phelps, 1991; Vermulean & Minor, 1998; Watt, Eccles, & Durik, 2006).

Gottfredson's theory of career development (1981) described the impact that gender, cognitive development, volition and compromise have on aspiration. Her theory proposed that career choices began early in childhood, and narrowed as societal factors and awareness, particularly about gender, imposed on a child's aspiration (see also Gottfredson & Lapan, 1997). Similarly, the Social Cognitive Career Theory of Brown and Brooks (1996) purported that career development began early in life and reflected efficacy beliefs and successful experiences in terms of accomplishment, learning, social influences and physiological reactions. Career choice rested on confidence in oneself and one's ability, and one's image of oneself, which was also identified by Stitt-Gohdea (1997). Over the time of childhood and adolescence, gender became increasingly significant in career choice, and context also impacted on

choices (Lent & Brown, 1996; Stitt-Gohdea, 1997). In the last decade, career development has changed, with different patterns emerging, but the importance of adolescence as a time of future career definition remains, and the connection between vocational choice and identity formation remains consistent (Rogers & Creed, 2011; Usinger & Smith, 2010).

A longitudinal study implemented by Usinger and Smith (2010) in low socio-economic communities in America over six years with 60 students, identified six distinct groups of respondents, according to their sense of self. Overall, they found that across the 60 participants, those who were internally driven (about 40%) were most likely to confidently consider career options and pathways. There were two groups of interest for this discussion. The first, in the internally driven category, was a group of 13 students (8 male/5 female), labelled 'self-in-the-world', who had both a strong sense of identity and an early sense of their career direction. They demonstrated a willingness to explore diverse careers. The majority of the group graduated and entered further education. While not identified as gifted, these students were strong academic achievers in the overall group. However, when the results are analysed on a gender basis, the largest cluster of girls (15) was in a group labelled 'self-absorbed', in the category of externally driven. These participants displayed a lack of self-confidence and self-direction. They talked about career choices that reflected the expectations of important influences on their lives and expressed divergent lists of possible careers for their futures. The common thread among their career aspirations was to be famous. Most of the group graduated successfully and went on to further education, indicating strengths in academic ability, not evidenced in the school environment, which may indicate giftedness. Their final choices of career are not reported so the correlation of aspiration and career pathway cannot be confirmed. In a second, contrasting, longitudinal study of 631 high school students in the Australian context, Rogers and Creed (2011) identified that both biography and context had an impact on career aspiration in the school years. They did not find that gender had a major impact, and there was no indication of academic ability in the sample population.

It was evident that there is a need to support the aspirations of young gifted girls with career advice and information to overcome the barriers that still existed for high achievement in prestigious careers (Hollinger, 1991; Phelps, 1991; Vermulean & Minor, 1998). Kerr and Sodano (2003) suggested the implementation of counselling that gave girls specific information about their talent and its development, with chances to talk through decisions and possible futures as a way of supporting realistic planning for their lives. Maxwell (2007) recommended early career information and exploration, including career advice focused on building an identity. Program suggestions included the use of narrative to tell personal futures, specific programs focused on skills that overcome personal barriers to success, mentors and bibliotherapy. Interestingly, Maxwell also suggested the use of cinematherapy, describing the possibilities presented in discussing the key characters in many examples of popular culture, though mainly movies. Key to the suggestions was the need for interactive, guided activities and discussions with tangible support for young girls in entertaining different future prospects and careers. Likewise, Lamb and Daniels (1993) described an intervention program that included specific skills and thinking patterns, which had an impact on the attitude of girls to their future possibilities. Hollinger and Fleming (1993) devised a program that aimed to inform girls of the barriers to their aspirations, provide them with skills of personal agency, and information about career possibilities. Hollinger and Fleming noted that there was, at that time, little research about the lifespan development of gifted girls and Project Choice was designed to explore their lives and support their development. The program addressed personal skills that prepared the girls for questioning, persisting, goal setting and planning, and included opportunities to work with a mentor and to share sessions with parents. The inner capacities required to address career issues are representative of the intrapersonal catalysts described in Gagné's DMGT 2.0 (2008). The literature reflected the intrapersonal catalysts that Gagné (1995, 2004b, 2009) described as essential components of talent development. Aspirational thinking and behaviour was recognised as a catalyst. Young girls aspired to achieve in their lives, and the literature showed that their aspirations were impacted on by those around them, by the pressure they felt to achieve, and by the career advice and information they were given in school and at home. Gifted adolescent girls experienced many internal pressures as they matured and made choices about their future. There was

clear evidence in the literature that they needed skills and information to support their decision making as they considered career pathways and options. The literature suggested strategies, including the use of popular culture, to provide role models and diverse career examples that may not be available in a rural area.

Motivation, self-esteem and aspiration have been examined as intrapersonal catalysts that impact on the development process of talent. Gagné (2009) suggested that these catalysts served as filters for the environmental catalysts in a girl's life. Two specific environmental catalysts, that of school and that of rurality, will be looked at briefly, and the key environmental catalyst for this study, popular culture, will be considered finally in this literature review.

2.6 Environmental Catalysts in Talent Development

2.6.1 School

Adolescent gifted girls spend a majority of their time in school. hooks (1984) described education as critical to the development of women, believing that it offered freedom. Time spent in school is not only about learning but also time spent in intense social relationships with peers. In a rural setting, the diversity of possible peer relationships is constrained and the same friends may be present throughout school life, shaping visions of self through critique and advice about identity. The personal experience of education is a catalyst in the achievement of potential as it is the place where the developing identity is challenged and nurtured.

It was suggested in the literature that girls now succeeded academically in school, outperforming boys in academic areas and fitting the environment more successfully than boys (Elwood, 2005; Freeman, 2003, 2004; Sadowski, 2010). As well, there was evidence that academic opportunities were now easily accessible for gifted girls, and they had many chances, that women previously did not have, to achieve and be successful in academic study (Grant et al., 2000; Hollinger, 1991). Australian statistics in 2009 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6278.0Main%20Features22009?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6278.0&issue=2009&num=&view=>) showed that females made up 55% of all higher education students, and that 25% of females achieved a bachelor degree or higher as

compared to 21% of males. Female enrolment in higher education increased in Australia by 4% in the period from 2007 to 2008. In 2010, six of the twelve top-ranking schools in the results of the Higher School Certificate were girls' schools (http://www.eowa.gov.au/About_EOWA.asp). The Higher School Certificate is the final examination across all secondary schools in New South Wales, and is used for entry to further study at a tertiary level. Freeman's (2003) study of British school results in 2003 found that girls performed at a higher level than boys in all discipline areas. Results reported by Lubinski and Benbow (1994) using data from the United States of America (USA) were different. In their report, boys scored higher on mathematical reasoning and appeared in the top 10% of results more frequently than girls. Within the literature on girls and schooling, there was an emphasis on the success or otherwise of girls entering and continuing with science and maths subjects (Carpenter, 1985; Freeman, 2003, 2004; Grant et al., 2000; Heller & Ziegler, 1996; Mendick, 2005; Watt, 2006; Watt, Eccles, & Durik, 2006). Carpenter (1985) was concerned that there was a lack of research into the success of girls in STEM subjects in Australian schools and also that teachers did not necessarily understand the needs of capable girls in these subjects. More recently, Watt, Eccles, and Durik (2006) noted that in Australian schools girls were more likely to opt out of mathematics subjects when possible, and fewer girls chose to continue into higher level courses in mathematics and sciences.

There was indication in the literature that while girls were achieving well in the school environment (Elwood, 2005; Freeman, 2003; Maxwell, 2007; Mendez, 2000; Sullivan, 2009), this success did not appear to be evident in the choices they made after school as they entered the workforce (Eccles, 1994; Elwood, 2005; Freeman, 2004). Elwood (2005) confronted the question of whether girls were achieving more successfully by examining the way that success is measured in school. Examinations are a prime source of performance measurement and used to provide statistics on school learning. However, Elwood suggested that this was too simplistic, and that it cannot be used as an argument against ensuring that girls are given equitable opportunities in education settings. The environment of school may not actually actively support the successful achievement of girls.

There was more to school than the performance of academic tasks (Elwood, 2005). Components of the environment included the contextual attitudes of students, teacher attitudes, classroom climate, interactions with other students and classroom activity. While Sullivan's study (2009) raised some issues because it utilised results from a cohort identified in 1958, her discussion was relevant for this review. She found a more positive attitude towards science and maths in girls in single-sex schools, but ironically, a lower self-concept about their English ability than girls in co-educational schools. For boys, single-sex schooling maintained their positive self-perceptions in science and maths but lifted their perception of their abilities in English. To counter issues of old data, Sullivan clearly identified the societal changes that have occurred since the data were gathered, as well as the changes in curriculum and school activity. However, where her work was important was in the unchanged aspects. She found that co-educational schools tended to reinforce traditional views of achievement for girls and that the provision of better opportunities for girls had in some cases led to dismay at the seemingly poorer performance of boys. Her concern about the lack of confidence girls continued to have in some areas of the curriculum is expressed in the following statement:

Girls' relative lack of confidence in their abilities in maths and science is particularly worrying. The belief that the under-representation of girls and women in maths and sciences is due to a "natural" inferiority in these fields is still widely held. There is a danger that this area of disadvantage for girls and women will be neglected due to the perception that girls are now outperforming boys across the board. (Sullivan, 2009, p. 284)

Achievement aside, the behaviour girls demonstrated in school had led to the perception that they fit the school environment well (Elwood, 2005; Grant et al., 2000; Mendez, 2000). Elwood (2005) noted that teachers attributed the academic success of girls to their effort and compared their achievements in terms of this with boys who did not engage but still achieved well. This downplayed the academic ability of girls. There is consistent evidence of this in the literature. Kenway and Willis (1997) described the behaviour of girls as seeking invisibility in the classroom, noting that girls responded in ways that made the teacher happy and maintained order in the classroom. They were more willing to comply and fit into the classroom, withholding responses, maintaining a 'quiet' attitude and not interrupting or expecting attention (Mann, 1994). Girls choose a role to play in the classroom that enables them to fit in with the group. Renold and Allan (2006) undertook an interesting study

looking at the decisions young girls made in their lives at school between being bright or being beautiful. Drawing on three case studies from their broader data, they clearly showed that for some gifted girls the social relationships in their lives were more important than their academic achievement. They labelled the girls' responses to the choice of academics or relationships as being "feminine", ditching "clever" (p. 462) ... being "clever", ditching "feminine" (p. 464) ...being "clever" and "feminine" (p. 466). Their work concluded with an identification of the need to further examine the connections between girls' relationships and their academic success, and how they are positioned in terms of being feminine or clever.

The rapid-fire, short-answer style of questioning used by many teachers described by Mann (1994) does not allow for the style of thinking and knowing that Belenky (1986) suggested girls required to achieve well. Enders-Draglasser and Sellach (1997) found clear gender specific norms evident in classrooms that included interactions, responses, competitive behaviour and attention in both teacher response and teacher acceptance of behaviours. Grieve (1994) noted that teachers responded more openly to boys' requests and assertive behaviour while expecting girls to be more compliant and passive. The work of Myhill (2002) contradicted other literature. When investigating the patterns of interaction in classrooms from primary settings through to secondary school classrooms, she found that consistently, the high-achieving girl was predominant in interaction sequences in the classroom, responding to questions, offering ideas and engaging with the teacher. Despite the study highlighting issues of the manner of questions, the depth of conversation and the level of off-task conversation by underachieving students of either gender, it presented a different picture of the interaction patterns in the classroom. She noted that teachers did respond differently to individual students, suggesting that they may well respond to and challenge gifted girls although the differentiated responses did not always reflect a conscious decision.

Mendez (2000) suggested that when girls were identified as gifted learners, they felt a sense of safety to behave differently, to participate in class and to aspire to do well. He found that when girls had been placed in gifted programs they were more likely to compete for better grades, to behave assertively and to challenge their skills.

However, identification can place great expectations on girls to perform at a high level and to utilise all their talents, at the expense of themselves. The tendency of girls to want to meet the expectations of others meant that they attempted to achieve in all areas of learning (Maxwell, 2007). Girls experienced higher levels of anxiety around the effort they needed to apply (Carpenter, 1985) but they displayed a greater sense of self-efficacy. They also set themselves higher goals and worked harder than boys (Elwood, 2005; Mendez, 2007). While teachers applauded their work ethic and their focus in school they unwittingly made it harder for girls to achieve consistently by favouring boys in their responses and praise (Elwood, 2005; Heller & Parsons, 1981; Kenway & Willis, 1997). Teachers also tended to give girls fewer options for success than boys and held higher expectations for girls in terms of neatness and organisation (Kenway & Willis, 1997; Skelton, Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Read, & Hall, 2009). Elwood (2005) described the emergence of a new stereotype: the overachieving girl. These girls successfully competed academically with boys, challenged the expectations of their behaviour, and chose not only to forego social experiences to do well in school but also to risk the teacher responding to them negatively for not complying with the expectations for their behaviour. This stereotype was also identified by Loeb and Jay (1987).

In a study by Skelton et al. (2009), it was found that not only did teachers hold traditional expectations of girls and boys in the classroom but that they were more likely to adjust their teaching to address the needs of boys in terms of achievement. Teachers recognised that they tacitly supported girls with traditional expectations such as neatness and housekeeping tasks and that they expected their conversations with girls to be about 'girlie' topics. Interestingly, the literature suggested that the broad response to the improved academic success of girls in schools had been to focus on boys and ensure they did not underachieve, problematising the academic gains made by girls and highlighting the deep-seated traditional responses to female achievement that continued to exist (Elwood, 2005; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Skelton et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2009; Watt, 2006). Despite the results of a study that showed girls were strong in the classroom, Myhill (2002) raised concerns around the willingness of girls to go along with the school game rather than speak out as boys do, or disengage when not involved.

The conflicting messages girls receive in the school environment could result in them playing down their abilities, showing a lack of confidence to take on difficult subjects such as mathematics, and attributing their success to hard work and effort, rather than ability. There is a lack of emotional support for girls in schools (Heller & Parsons, 1981; Maxwell, 2007; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1994), resulting in a need for girls to discern their own ways to cope. In a disturbing study, Schmuck and Schmuck (1994) found that principals and teachers created situations for girls that were difficult, quoting an example of a girl in a meeting addressing an issue of bullying with no other female present. The young girl felt she was unsupported and chose to remain quiet. The conclusions of this study highlighted that, for girls, there is often a need to be quiet and not speak out about issues within the school environment.

Despite evidence that girls appeared to be more suited to the school environment, the literature continued to indicate that this is not necessarily so for gifted girls. A gifted girl may feel the need to present herself in a different way in the classroom and may find herself subjected to passive role stereotyping that over time erodes her image of herself as an able academic student. Girls then may choose to remove themselves from the situation, to present the image that is expected, or to compete and risk losing their social support. The profiles of Betts and Neihart (1988, 2010) identify that some gifted girls prefer to be invisible in the classroom. Over a long period of time this leads to undermining of self-confidence and learning esteem. As an environmental catalyst impacting on the development of talent, the literature indicated that, for some girls, school has the potential to be a disruptive catalyst.

2.6.2 Rurality

Living in a rural setting positions gifted young people in different ways than their urban peers (Howley, 2009; Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Vermeulan & Minor, 1988). Key differences include the level of access to resources, isolation, differences in values and expectations and opportunities to be exposed to a range of experiences and cultural artefacts and events (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001; Schmitt-Wilson & Welsh, 2012). Lawrence (2009) identified the issue of rural students as “problematic and complex” (p.462) in her comprehensive review of research into education for rural gifted students. Her review presented a resounding impression that, when

thinking about giftedness in young people, it was essential to consider the differences between those in rural settings and those in urban settings. Many of the barriers identified as impacts on the achievement of potential are not unfamiliar, or uniquely rural (Lawrence, 2009), but the literature established an impression that living in a rural setting created challenges for gifted young people (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2008; Arnold, 1991; Clark & Zimmerman, 2001; Cross & Dixon, 1998). It suggested that gifted rural young people would have lower aspirations than their urban counterparts due to a number of factors including the preponderance of lower economic status in rural communities, the geographical isolation, the resourcing of education, and the opportunities in education settings.

Bailey, Knight, and Riley (1995) identified that many gifted students in rural Australia could be defined as significantly disadvantaged, an assumption made by considering the depressed rural situation in Australia at the time he was writing. While the researchers were focused on an area in northern New South Wales, they were not prepared to give a strict definition of rurality because of the diversity of variables that impact on gifted students anywhere. They were not prepared to separately address the needs of rural gifted students, even as they noted that the students were disadvantaged. Bailey, Knight, and Riley highlighted factors that were particularly pertinent when investigating the situation of Australian rural gifted students, including ambivalent attitudes towards achievement, gender stereotypes and the power of egalitarian attitudes, distance and lack of numbers. Alloway and Dally-Trim (2008) confirmed the complexity of rural settings in Australia, and emphasised the impact of diversity on any research conclusion.

Colangelo, Assouline, and New (1999, 2001) focused critical attention on the education needs of gifted children in rural areas. Their national assessment of gifted rural education identified strengths in rural schools, including greater adult-child contact, opportunities to be involved in multiple activities, more individualised learning and community involvement, but also challenges that included few peers, appropriately trained teachers, a lack of access to community resources, community attitudes, isolation and limited curricula. A key point of both reports recounted the lack of detailed research on gifted students across rural America, and the gap in

knowledge and understanding of the forces that impacted on the talent development of these students. These reports identified challenges. Lawrence (2009) also highlighted the impact of diversity in examining the situation of gifted young people in rural areas when she noted that while there were many studies on rural gifted children, the very nature of the rural environment meant that they were fragmentary, examining limited groups in diverse settings. The various research studies tended to focus on a limited group of participants in a particular setting. While generalisations can occur, the diversity of rurality, indicated by the fuzziness of the many definitions used, makes it crucial to note that an overarching conclusive study of rurality and giftedness is needed.

A gap in the literature on rural gifted education is clear when undertaking a search for Australian work. There has been little consistent research on the gifted in rural settings. A search of the Australian Digital Research Theses (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/book/result?l-australian=y&l-format=Thesis&q=&sortby=dateDesc>) in June 2014 identified 20 Australian theses that identify as studying rural gifted young people. A search of the 2008 Australian database of theses, held on the website of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented, showed that out of 121 theses recorded, only 10 (12%) revealed the word 'rural' within their abstracts. Only three (0.4%) used the word 'rural' in the title. In the *Australasian Journal of Gifted Education*, only 10 articles have been published since 1995 that include the key term 'rural' in their title or content. None have been published focused on gifted girls in rural settings. A search in *Education in Rural Australia* since its inception in 1991 until 2011 found only one article with 'gifted' in the title, and none with 'talented', and no incidences of titles which included the search term, 'gifted girl'. In Australia, rural gifted children, and gifted girls in rural settings have not historically been a major focus of research.

The identification of gifted young people in rural settings emerged as a theme in relevant literature. Pendarvis and Wood (2009) supported the argument presented by Clark and Zimmerman in 2001 that the tools used in school settings in urban areas to identify gifted children were not always appropriate in rural areas because of the limited cultural experiences that rural children may have had. Utilising a variety of assessment tools sensitive to local cultural practices that identify candidates over a

The identification of gifted young people in rural settings emerged as a theme in relevant literature. Pendarvis and Wood (2009) supported the argument presented by Clark and Zimmerman in 2001 that the tools used in school settings in urban areas to identify gifted children were not always appropriate in rural areas because of the limited cultural experiences that rural children may have had. Utilising a variety of assessment tools sensitive to local cultural practices that identify candidates over a

period of time, or through problem-based activity are suggested as ways of more effectively finding the gifted children in rural settings than the traditional testing regimen. Montgomery (2004) also described the linear model of provision used in urban settings, where traditional assessment is followed by a program of specific targeted activity, as an inappropriate model for rural students. Her suggestion was to create opportunities that offered students chances for growth, allowing them to show their capacity through acting and doing. Other items for assessment suggested included work samples, performance and contribution in class and involvement in projects both inside and outside of school (Abell & Lennex, 1999; Jones & Southern, 1992; Lewis, 1999; Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1987).

Because in rural schools there is potentially a greater knowledge of individuals and more opportunity to know students over a long period of time, there is a greater chance of students being noticed (Colangelo et al., 2001). The diversity of life experience may relegate some gifted young rural children to groups that are less able, simply because they have not had the opportunity to learn or develop appropriate learning skills. The family has greater influence on rural children's esteem (Glendenning, 1998) and so young people may feel they are being disloyal to their family by showing enthusiasm for academic work or aspiring for further learning. Attitudes toward achievement in rural settings tend to reflect stereotyped expectations which may make it difficult for gifted girls to think about their futures in ways concomitant with their potential (Lamb & Daniels, 1993).

Schmitt-Wilson and Welsh (2012) examined the level of vocational knowledge displayed by rural gifted children when measured against their academic ability, socio-economic status and gender. They found a relationship between ability and vocational knowledge, supporting the need for gifted rural students to have access to vocational knowledge to encourage diverse aspirations. They suggested the importance of providing gifted young people in rural areas with factual information about the preparation needed and pathways available for entering a range of vocations, as well as exposure to a variety of career options. In exploring how schools can foster aspiration, Sewell and Hauser (1975) found that for rural students it was harder to achieve their goals without strong personal drive because when they set

themselves on a route of high academic achievement, choosing to continue their education beyond the local school and community, the challenges include leaving home and learning to live away without immediate family support. This will sometimes place young people in a difficult position with parents, who in rural areas may hold lower aspirations for their children (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991).

For rural gifted young people there is greater pressure to learn only what is needed for future localised employment (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Fan & Chen 1999; Rojewski, 1999). School was recognised as the place where skills were learned that promoted entry into work, and this was more important than further education. The career choices of rural students have to be made earlier, and often with limited advice or counselling (Vermeulan & Minor, 1988). This may create problems, as recognised by Lea-Wood (2004) when she noted that over time, gifted young people were more likely to change their minds about career choices than non-gifted young people. Information available about alternative pathways and the world of higher education was not accessible and so gifted young rural students were less informed (Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Vermeulan & Minor, 1988). While these are older studies, the notion of limited choice and advice continued to be present in the literature (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2008; Clark & Zimmerman, 2001; Harris, 2007; Montgomery, 2004). This may also increase anxiety and fear, thus constraining the aspirational choices of gifted adolescents (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2008).

After school, bright rural students often leave to continue learning (Howley, 2009), and this key change in lifestyle can be the reason for the alternate choice to stay behind and work. An Australian study recently noted that rural students were under-represented in university courses, particularly science and mathematics, regardless of gender, and that there were a range of barriers to young rural students successfully completing their study. Reasons cited for this included the quality of the education experience in rural schools, isolation and the financial and emotional impact of leaving home (Wilson, Lyons, & Quinn 2013). James, Krause, and Jennings (2010), in investigating retention at Australian universities, found that rural students were more likely to either defer their study or leave before finishing their course due to

family commitments or financial issues. The prevalence of females in these figures was not detailed.

While Pittman, McGinty, and Gerstl-Pepin (1999) and Lawrence (2009) wrote about the negative impact the need for gifted youth leaving to study had on rural communities, suggesting that it was problematic to encourage the brightest to leave a local area, others noted how this impacted on the aspirations and future plans of young people, especially girls. It was often the oldest girl who remained at home (O'Quinn, 1999) and who would not identify herself as smart. Crouter, Carson, Vicary, and Butler (1988) looked at the periods of transition between being a rural adolescent girl and a grown rural woman and noted that it was the quality of the relationships with the mother that had most impact on the timing of the transitions. Girls who experienced a strong maternal relationship were less likely to marry and reproduce earlier. While their study did not focus just on 'gifted' young women, and the results did not report the impact of the mother's level of educational achievement as a variable in the closeness of the relationship, it indicated that the family influenced the future choices of young rural girls. In Australian settings, this was found to be similar by Lea-Wood (2004) in her long-term study that looked at influences on highly gifted young women. Her participants attended schools in regional cities in Victoria, Australia.

In an earlier study, O'Quinn (1999) interviewed girls who had left rural areas to study elsewhere and concluded, differently, that it was the father's influence that impacted on the choices made in terms of leaving home to study. She also noted that the girls who left behaved differently in their college environment and struggled with returning to the expectations and the roles they were to play at home. The gap sometimes became too great and they returned home to the security of familiar expectations. Those who returned had little opportunity to develop their talents and fell into the traditional roles of caring for family and the community. While Noble et al.'s (1999) model of female talent development indicated that the giftedness of women could manifest itself in community practice and involvement rather than activity with a more global impact, it was the satisfaction they felt that made this acceptable. The

girls and women O'Quinn talked to did not necessarily feel satisfied and were indeed wary of their ability to achieve.

Another barrier for gifted young rural people included the lack of a critical mass of gifted students, which would support program sustainability and ongoing development. In many rural communities there was a pervasive attitude that there were no able students present, and so there was little incentive to create opportunities for their development. The work of Colangelo et al. (1999, 2001) and Colangelo, Assouline, Baldus, Ihrig, and New (2006), highlighted the dependence in rural settings on the teacher with the expertise or motivation to drive programs. Such reliance on one person was far from ideal, as they found if the driver left then the program did not remain.

In rural communities there may be pressure on the gifted young person to contribute to the community. Both Lawrence (2009) and Lewis (1999) cited this as an impelling reason for increasing the focus on giftedness in rural settings. Interestingly, rather than blame schools for lack of high achievement by many rural students, Young (1998) chose to focus on the need for gifted students to be aware of the intrapersonal characteristics of determination, self-belief and achievement capacity and how these impact on goals. This was supported by others (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Sewell & Hauser, 1975) and reflected Gagné's DMGT (2008) where there was a clear connection between environmental catalysts and intrapersonal catalysts in talent development, with intrapersonal aspects filtering the environment prior to impact on the developmental process.

Despite many concerns about the life experience of a rural gifted young person, the literature also highlighted the misconception of only seeing the rural environment through a deficit lens. There were advantages to living in a rural setting for gifted children (Arnold, 1991; Colangelo et al., 2006; Howley et al., 2009; Vermeulan & Minor, 1988). The strengths of a rural environment were outlined as being the close connections to the local community that offered chances for real problem solving and engagement, and the possible diversity of role models that could be found in the community, providing young people with histories and skills that enable them to

develop specific areas of talent. As well, the community is often involved in a mutually beneficial relationship with the school, where both parties can learn from each other and work together for a common purpose. Gifted adolescents in a rural school can become involved in myriad extracurricular activities, allowing them the chance to develop talents outside of their academic talents, including planning, leadership, social skills, community service and mentoring (Battle & Grant, 1995; Grant, Battle, & Heggoy, 2000). Case studies of three young gifted adults in the small study by Battle and Grant (1995) highlighted the range of chances the participants had to try out different talent areas, to learn skills in authentic settings, and to take up diverse and often mature roles within the school and the broader community, thus enriching their development and offering a range of future pathways. These students, and some of the women in the work of Vermeulan and Minor (1988), saw their rural backgrounds as positive and life shaping, a positive aspect of rural life as also noted by Cross and Dixon (1998).

Despite studies highlighting the positive features of rural settings, Montgomery (2004) indicated that it was a mindset change that was needed, focusing more on what the individual can achieve in the place of living, rather than noting the lack of chances that would be available in rural settings. Within a school setting that encouraged young gifted people to be involved in many different projects, to contribute to the school community and help others, the confidence and self-esteem that promoted successful achievement could be nurtured. This is a strength of rural communities and needed to be utilised when planning gifted programs (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009). When considering the potential talent development for gifted girls, the challenge suggested in the literature is the need to support girls' confidence when they are confronted with traditional attitudes and expectations that will challenge their view of their potential. For gifted girls in rural settings, it may be more difficult to make choices about their own future unless they are supported to see what is possible. They may be encouraged, however, to take on the variety of opportunities that are present, and establish a clear sense of purpose and identity which will enable them to bridge the divide between home and further education.

School education for gifted students in rural areas may or may not include differentiated learning opportunities (Colangelo et al., 1999). Bailey et al. (1995) described a project that addressed the needs of students across primary and secondary school, beginning in Year 3 and finishing in Year 10. A set of enrichment modules with differentiated content was provided for students to work on individually, written on a set of principles that used specific pedagogies from Maker (1982). The project evolved around the preparation of the modules, the writing and the implementation of them with a small group of parents, teachers and children. While Bailey et al. provided insight into what was needed, and a model of what can happen, this early article did not provide an indication of long-term success in breaking the barriers to achievement for gifted rural students.

Laura and Smith (2009) expressed concern about the teaching of science and the disengagement of students overall in current science teaching, as it was increasingly taught in a passive and deconstructed way. They identified, like others, that gifted students in rural areas experienced reduced resources and greater isolation in their learning. However, they also noted the possible advantages in rural areas as being the closer connection to the natural world that enabled the discovery of science as it was originally perceived—"the experience of science discovery involves a sense of mystery and awe at the seemingly endless wonders of nature" (p. 153). Their suggestion of new pedagogies for science discussed a greater connection with the real world, and opportunities to explore personal connections in the world, but did not differentiate between the needs of girls and boys for science teaching. It could be argued that their "enchantment pedagogy" (p. 162) with its core aspects of interaction, problem solving and multiple emotional perspectives, addressed the needs of adolescent gifted girls as they sought their identity. Science is an area where there remains a gap between the achievement of boys and girls outside of the school environment, and it is a key learning area that many girls move away from in adolescence (Carpenter, 1985; Freeman, 2003, 2004; Grant et al., 2000; Heller & Ziegler, 1996; Mendick, 2005; Watt, 2006; Watt, Eccles, & Durik, 2006). For rural girls, immersed in a more natural world as suggested by Laura and Smith (2009), this pedagogy may offer new ways of engaging girls in science as it incorporated relational strategies and self-reflection, both identified as important in the identity

development of adolescent girls. No other literature on rural giftedness so specifically addressed what could happen in the classroom to best support girls to take up non-traditional study, in a way that appeared to connect with the needs of gifted girls.

In New South Wales, full-time classroom opportunities for rural gifted children were not available in primary schooling until 1992, when the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (DEC) opened selective classes in Years 5 and 6 in rural regions. In August 2014, the DEC site (http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/learning/k-6assessments/oc_schools.php) listed 75 primary schools that would have an Opportunity Class across New South Wales in 2015. Only 11 of these schools are in regions that are classed as rural (Western, New England and Riverina). A further four schools are in coastal regional areas. The site listed 42 fully selective or part selective secondary schools (http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/types/shs_ahs_details.php). Eight of these were located in rural settings. Such a paucity of formal provision is echoed in the literature on gifted education in rural settings in Australia.

Gifted adolescent girls in rural settings were not the focus of literature as a discrete cohort, in Australian literature or international literature. This research provides a window into the lives of gifted girls, and their responses to popular culture which often reflects the world of urban living rather than rural living. There is no literature that specifically reports on gifted young Australian people in this way.

2.7 Popular Culture

2.7.1 Background

Popular culture has been considered an influence on young people since the days of Plato (Buckingham, 1993), recognised as a phenomenon that reflected the human need to describe how people live and what they do. It questioned, mocked and pulled apart the established social order, either resisting or reinforcing collective social values and beliefs (Cheu, 2007; Driscoll, 2002; Fishwick, 1985). In essence, popular culture was created to share stories about life with groups of people, providing both insight into, and commentary on, the current world (Buckingham, 1993).

A key defining component of popular culture was its construction by a creator who was targeting an audience comprised of the general population. Using images and words to convey a picture of life and relationships, it had the power to deliver examples of how life should or could be, to a generic or targeted audience (Giddens, 1991). Giddens described the images portrayed as a collage of multiple images and stories from different locations and settings. This form of presentation afforded a decontextualised perspective of life, and disturbed what had previously been a narrative approach to the retelling of experience (Giddens, 1991). The juxtapositioning of stories and people from diverse locations and life places resulted in conglomerate suggestions for identity that were disconnected, with a blurring of reality and fiction, and yet brought together as role models of behaviour and appearance (Harris, 2004b).

Popular culture was able to suggest positions for individuals within their social groups, and to present these positions as realities, thus sometimes giving a message about roles and behaviours that were powerfully presented to those who were seeking identity (Walkerdine, 1993). It was able to connect with key human needs (Fishwick, 1985) giving people a sense of belonging when they recognised the characters and lives on display, as well as a set of heroes and language patterns, providing motifs including quotes and actions. Legends were constructed around the people who featured within the products. In this way popular culture achieved its purpose of bringing to audience attention the daily lives of others and offering an escape from the normality of life. Fishwick (1985) expressed concern that it exaggerated or distorted stereotypes, creating a norm that provided a confusing message, and that it informed the beliefs of individuals despite their experiences and real life setting. The non-verbal messages expressed in images displayed patterns of behaviour and response that might contradict the verbal messages accompanying the images. These messages had a strong implied meaning that Fishwick suggested could have more power to influence than the written or spoken word, especially for young people.

2.7.2 Adolescent Girls and Popular Culture

The literature suggested that young people experienced an omniscient presence of popular culture in their lives, which generated concerns around its presentation of

ways of responding, being and feeling (Brown, Teufel, Birch, & Kancherla, 2006; Buckingham, 1993). As a deliberate construct, popular culture delivered a message that could be both explicit and subtle, potentially confounding meaning for the audience. Young people may not have fully developed their capacity to critically and actively think about what they were exposed to in popular culture, which Buckingham (1993) suggested would mean that the interpretation of messages might differ from the intention of the creator. Early research into the impact of popular culture assumed that young people were passive recipients of these messages (Buckingham, 1993). However, as interactions with, and responses to, popular culture were recognised as more active, it became evident that popular culture had a role as a powerful teaching tool, constructed to present a range of truths that the audience were able to interpret in their own way (Durham, 1999a; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2007; Walkerdine, 1997). It provided young people with experiences that, because they were pleasurable, had great impact on identity and self-understanding. The captured behaviours included skills of interaction, personal appearance, success and relationship.

The relationship that girls had with popular culture was a driving force in the instigation of girl and girlhood studies (Duits, 2008). Girls were identified as key consumers of a variety of forms of media and as such were a focus of marketing (Charles, 2010a; Cheu, 2007; Kearney, 2006; Pipher, 2004). The culture portrayed by the media provided girls with options for their behaviours and futures, suggesting that they were able to be heroic, successful and proactive in changing the opportunities they could access.

A consistent discourse evident in popular culture described the 'can-do' girl, who represented a sense of power and possibility, highlighted by characters able to overcome challenge using physical strength and aggression (Duits, 2008; Hains, 2007; Harris, 2004a; Paule, 2007; Pipher, 1994). Physically, these girls met societal expectations of beauty and appearance, while also playing the role of key heroes who worked against evil. They were beautiful, slender and active, or quirky, and presented as highly visible and successful (Harris, 2004a). Girl power has been a consistent message given in the media to teenage girls (Bentley, 1999; Hains, 2007; Harris, 2004a). The characters were able to overcome stereotyped roles and achieve in their

own way, sometimes with violence or cunning. They showed a sassy and assertive way to challenge the traditional feminine roles in the world of work and had different relationships with males (Harris, 2004a). However, there was consistent visual reinforcement of the need for girls to be both beautiful and sexually appealing, with a strong emphasis on, finally, stereotypical roles (Durham, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Hains, 2007; Signorelli, 1997; Ward & Harrison, 2005). In their research study examining 120 pieces of published research, Ward and Harrison (2005) found strong connections between media engagement and the reinforcement of traditional views of women's roles. Studies frequently found that women were most often shown as housewives, mothers or temptresses. These images were most prevalent in soap operas and music videos, which were overall the forms of media most frequently watched by young girls.

This reflected the earlier work by Signorelli (1997) whose major findings highlighted the contradictory nature of many of the images of women in the media. While strong and successful women were portrayed as role models, ongoing stereotypes were reinforced when the illustrations in many articles about success were thin, traditionally beautiful women. Women displayed self-reliant, problem solving behaviours while also being manipulative and worried about their appearance. Relationships were more important in their lives than careers. There were still more images of women in lingerie or glamorous clothing, participating in domestic activities, than women in work situations. Given that these images were identified as key images presented in popular culture, and that, despite the success of feminism as a movement that changed the experiences of women and girls in terms of opportunity and expectations, Signorelli's work suggested that the message communicated to girls through popular culture was problematic. In similar research, Fabrianesi, Jones, and Reid (2008) examined four magazines: two produced for an audience of Australian girls between 6 and 12 years of age, and two for a slightly older group up to 17 years of age. Their findings echo Signorelli's, with a preponderance of images focused on appearance and beauty. Overall, there was a lack of diversity in the occupational roles presented in the magazines for both age groups, with few examples of women who were not in the entertainment or fashion industry. There was little difference between the content of the magazines aimed at the different age groups, and the study

concluded that young girls were bombarded with images throughout their childhood, overwhelming them with messages about body image, occupation and lifestyle that are not realistic.

Wohlwend (2009) described another source of information for young girls as the 'Disney princess' phenomenon. Disney is an important producer of media for young people. Wohlwend suggested that the images in Disney media blurred the lines between reality and fantasy and provided young girls with a variety of characters who presented diverse but consistent messages about the way a girl should be. However, key iconic characters are the Disney princesses, who display a consistent set of characteristics that suggest ways for girls to behave. These include being pretty, waiting for the rescuing prince and being focused on appearance. Disney recognised that girls engaged with not only the movie, but the life it portrayed and the way of being presented, thus increasing the impact of the movies on girls by enabling them to be involved with it as well. They targeted girls and created a range of franchised products that had marketing prominence, thus reinforcing the messages presented in the movies (Cheu, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009). Wohlwend noticed that when young children, predominantly girls, played with related merchandise they replayed the roles shown in popular culture, with some adaptations and variations. It was noticeable that they returned to common story lines even as they added contextual variations. Disney presented girls with constructed images of select views, and young girls did not necessarily recognise that these images were constructed, instead seeing them as their reality.

A constant theme in Disney movies is that of an adolescent girl overcoming difficult circumstances to successfully achieve her goals, thus providing an "ongoing editorial on what it means to be a successful woman" (Hamilton, 2008, p. 79). Cheu (2007) described the messages presented by Disney movies as optimistic and emotional, where girl characters are rescued or able to overcome challenging situations. Even though many of these girls had female mentors who encouraged them to speak out and be noticed, the final solution to their circumstance was frequently focused on changing their appearance to a more standardised look, and using relationships to achieve their purpose. Despite the achievement messages across all forms of popular

culture suggesting that a girl could do what she set her heart on doing, the context of the achievement was mainly in areas of fashion or music, and was always about filling in time while waiting for a 'prince' to arrive. Pipher (2004) was concerned at the vulnerability of girls to these messages, and the notion that girls were thus constrained to a limited number of choices of ways to be. Hamilton (2008) suggested that information being presented in the media created group norms, and that girls who did not conform to the media culture were excluded. This could result in bullying or bitchiness, behaviours often demonstrated by the girls or women in popular culture. Women were shown as powerful or mean with a tendency to use other girls to achieve their goals, or to use their body manipulatively to achieve a purpose (Charles, 2010a; Duits, 2008; Durham, 2003; Signorelli, 1997). While this is a form of rebellion against stereotypical attitudes, the positioning of girls in this way raised concerns in terms of its long-term impact on the status of girls in society and the contradictions of images that display power and beauty positioned as co-dependent (Durham, 2003; Harris, 2004b; McRobbie, 1991; Pipher, 1994; Signorelli, 1997).

However, Charles's work (2010a) with adolescent girls in an elite Australian girls' school identified that, while girls recognised the messages presented within the media and the impact of iconic personalities as role models in terms of appearance and relationship behaviours, they linked success to hard work and identified empowerment as being proactive. To these girls, a successful woman was able to set goals, manage her own life and work hard to achieve them, while also finding time to ensure her appearance and presentation remained acceptably beautiful. They did not see the contradiction in this, and when predicting their future pathways set themselves high goals to achieve while still young (Charles, 2010a). It must be noted that, as students at an elite girls' school, there is some concern about the generalisability of this finding. These girls were not every girl and this study reinforced the power of context in shaping a girl's identity. When Hamilton (2008) interviewed Australian girls from broader contexts, her work reinforced the concern that girls were manipulated by media to aspire to a limited range of ways to be, reinforcing the notion of group similarity in both appearance and attitude.

2.7.3 Body Image

Popular culture has been implicated as a key factor in the dissatisfaction many girls feel with their body, because of the consistent presence of thin women in all forms of media (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fabrianesi et al., 2008; Ferguson, Winegard, & Winegard, 2011; Gilbert, Keery, & Thompson, 2005; Hamilton, 2008; Harper & Tiggemann, 2007; Holmstron, 2004; Ward & Harrison, 2005). Grabe, Ward, and Hyde (2008) completed a comprehensive analysis of literature that examined the connections between women, body image and media and found that in a sample of 77 studies, exposure to images of thin women in the media impacted on body image and satisfaction in women. The majority of the studies involved women with a mean age between 15 and 20 years, from indeterminate locations. In Fiji, Gilbert et al. (2005) found that adolescent girls became obsessed with diet and food intake within twelve months of the introduction of regular television access. A complex Australian study with 90 women between the ages of 18 to 35 years exposed women to magazine advertising images in three groups (Tiggemann & Harper, 2007). The first group looked at thin women, the second at images with thin women and one man, and the third at images with no women. The women were also asked to complete a survey detailing the way they regularly interacted with magazines and their responses to images in a range of sources of popular culture. There was a clear connection between dissatisfaction with the body and the images viewed. Other research posits that it takes only thirty minutes of exposure to impact on a female's view of their body (Myers & Biocca, 1992) and there is evidence that as girls become older they more frequently compare themselves to the models who are extremely thin (Martin & Kennedy, 1993, cited in Bentley, 1999). However, Ward and Harrison (2005) reported evidence that while media exposure may create a sense of bodily dissatisfaction, there were many variables, including family, setting and self-esteem that contributed to self-image. Likewise, Ferguson et al. (2011) argued that there is no evidence of a significant causal link between media exposure and aspiration to be thin, citing research that demonstrates the greater impact of peer influence on bodily satisfaction. They concluded that:

... media effects are not viewed as a primary causal pathway for developing body dissatisfaction or eating disorders. However, exposure to thin images in the media ... may 'prime' this existing process. (Ferguson et al., 2011, p. 28)

Tiggemann is a major Australian contributor to work on the impact of media images on body image and satisfaction as related to media, undertaking experimental studies exploring the connections between media images and body satisfaction (Tiggemann, 2003, 2005, 2006; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater, 2003; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). The notion of being thin and therefore successful is frequently alluded to through visual images and text in popular culture. Tiggemann (2005) described the impact of soap operas on the view that both boys and girls had of their body size, finding that time spent watching this form of popular culture drove girls to strive for thinness and had a greater impact on the body satisfaction of girls than boys. Tiggemann's conclusions indicated that it is the choice of content and motive for watching that impacts most on body image rather than the time spent watching. Those who chose to view for social learning tended to have a poorer body image than others (Tiggemann, 2005). Tiggemann and Slater (2003) studied 84 female university students who viewed a range of music videos and found that there was increased social comparison and body dissatisfaction after viewing. Their work, along with the work of Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2003a) on the impact of television advertisements, highlighted the impact that popular culture has on the view of, and satisfaction with, their bodies that young women show. The literature appeared to show that in popular culture, thinness tended to define the societal concept of beauty in a powerful way.

However, Harper and Tiggemann (2007) acknowledged the problem with experimental approaches when studying this phenomenon, noting that in the real world women tend to flick through magazines, scanning images, and not actually looking closely, whereas in an experimental study they are required to look closely and deliberately respond to the images presented. This is also noted by Holmstrom (2004) in a meta-analysis of the research (3,300 citations) on body image that argued that the studies were inconclusive due to a number of inconsistencies including the use of both television and print media images. Design factors, such as the diverse ages of participants and length of exposure to the images, raised questions of validity. To address this, Holmstrom identified 34 studies from the initial set that were consistent in these areas. Her results remain somewhat inconclusive even though she felt that the sheer number and diversity of images now available in media perhaps reduced the

evocation of response. She also reported other variables that came into play, including family, peers and context, which could not be ignored.

Despite noting some limitations to their study, Hobbs, Broder, Pope, and Rowe (2006) found that young girls were able to critically respond to TV and print images focused on weight loss products, demonstrating some level of awareness of the way that popular culture contributed to concerns about weight by using techniques to convince the audience of the success of their product, and its safety. The girls, aged between 9 and 17 years and from a range of contexts across America, were able to recognise the persuasive techniques and to utilise their existing knowledge of nutrition and health to question the promises of the advertisements. Hobbs et al. (2006) noted both the prevalence of stereotypical beauty and the emphasis on how losing weight equated to success in advertising material that created a strong message about body weight and appearance. The fact that young girls were not able to spontaneously identify missing information in the advertisements about weight loss and control implied that they would still be influenced by what they saw in the images. While their work included groups from rural areas as well as urban environments, the distinction between responses was not made clear. For young adolescent girls in rural areas, though, where there is an increased reliance on media to provide role models, further work is required to explore the impact on their body image.

2.7.3.1 Beauty

Being thin is connected in the media with being beautiful, and the acceptable definition of what is beautiful is defined in popular culture in a standardised way (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Martin and Peters (2005) explored the concept of beauty in an interesting study where participant girls aged from 7 to 17 years manipulated images and words to identify their views of beauty, and to categorise the images of beauty presented in the media. While the study had limitations because its participants were from middle class groups including church groups and girls on a 'character-enhancing' camp, it provided an insight into the way young girls define beauty. Using media related methodology, the study required the participants to create collages illustrating their ideals of beauty. The visual definition of beautiful changed over the age groups. Younger girls desired to look pretty but wanted to retain their

individuality while the older groups placed greater emphasis on being the same as friends and being comfortable. Interestingly, the preferred images of beauty for all groups—cute, girl next door or sex kitten—were not found as frequently in the media as those that portrayed a strong sense of being sensual and trendy. A key finding in the study for this research is that the girls appeared to be able to read the cultural nuances and were less immediately susceptible to the images presented. This could reflect the background experiences of the participants, who tended to fit Harris's (2004a) definition of the 'can-do' girl, with concomitant self-esteem and confidence to achieve their goals. The 'at risk' girl may be less able to critically respond to the images.

The girls in Martin and Peter's (2005) study constructed their own representation of the image of beauty. Rather than passively consuming popular culture images and messages as instructional, Kearney (2008) suggested that girls who were producers of popular culture were able to express themselves without the constraints presented by the fantasy elements of popular culture images and messages, and the silencing they experienced due to absence in production (Pipher, 2004). Women have always produced their own forms of popular culture, working in groups and using the occasion as both social and productive. They shared images and information through self-expression in crafts and diaries or journals. The quilts that women constructed contained messages of freedom, and the embellishments, including images and symbols, have been recognised as expressions of rebellion (Kearney, 2008). The power afforded women when constructing media is demonstrated in a study completed by Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012). While their analysis of comments posted to a 'fat acceptance blog' found that the thin ideal presented in media created conflict, distress and insecurity in women (of an indeterminate age), it also highlighted the power of the blog as a communication space for women. The members who posted constructed a shared perspective and expressed concern about the prevalence of the thin ideal, and its impact, in current culture. The emergence of blogs as a way of discussing intimate details of life experience is demonstrated by this study, which highlighted that popular culture tools could be utilised to support developing identity.

Unfortunately, historically, the cultural artefacts of women have often been described as trivial or domestic, lacking the power of the media culture and this may still be evident at the level of girls producing media (Kearney, 2008). When girls create their own texts there is opportunity to define self, to resist norms and to express views apart from the constructed message in popular media (Johnson, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Pipher, 2004). Wohlwend (2009) described the texts young girls created as they replayed dialogue and scenes from Disney movies, and commented on the way that young girls, while mimicking the original text also added their own interpretations and ideas while playing. Her research showed that young girls did more than act mimetically with props from popular culture, and this suggested, as Kearney did, that allowing girls the opportunity to create texts gave them greater freedom to challenge stereotypes and experiment with their own voice. Even as Kearney (2008) brought together examples of girls accessing the technology and support to create their own media, it is clear that it remains only a minority of girls, often seen as outliers or radicals among their peers, who create the media. Until girl-produced media is mainstream, powerful messages will continue to emanate from the major production companies and girls will learn how to be from these normed sources.

2.7.3.2 Identity

As a source of information, popular culture appeared to inspire adolescents to emulate the visible people and characters in their own identity development (Charles, 2010a; Duits, 2008; Hylmo, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008; McRobbie & McCabe, 1981). Richards (1993) countered the impact of popular culture on identity by emphasising that identity is a combination of family, temperament and external influences and so suggested that while young girls may see some stereotyping of roles while viewing, their context would have a greater influence. His intention to show that children were not simply passive receivers of the information was somewhat marred by a small sample size of participants, including his own children. However, his point that popular culture increased in its influence as young people explored different ways of being as they entered adolescence is important. Literature suggested that issues could arise when a young audience was unable to actively question and explore the presentation of stereotypes due to undeveloped critical thinking skills (Buckingham, 1993; Durham, 1998; Richards, 1993; Walkerdine, 1997). Walkerdine (1993) described the viewing habits of a young family of girls where television formed a

constant backdrop to their lives. She found that, despite a lack of focused attention, the girls identified with the main character and her way of being. The power of the medium to deliver messages about identity that become the norm is evident in this study although again, its small sample size is problematic.

Walkerdine (1997) continued to question the positioning of girls in media, noting that the alternate identities presented positioned girls in ways that, in real life, were feasible. Because the girls presented in these alternate views often found themselves in greater conflict or in challenging situations, she suggested that, without specific support and skill development around conflict and confidence, the position did not appear tenable to the ordinary girl as she viewed or experienced the images. More recent literature proposed that young girls were active consumers of popular culture and not as susceptible to its images as previously suggested (Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999). Hall (2011) reported that popular culture provided girls with a topic of conversation, and as such, provided a platform for sharing views and ideas with peers. It empowered some girls to express themselves, but sadly, also created the situation where other girls were silenced because of their lack of popular culture knowledge. In real life, then, popular culture is able to position some girls to have a more powerful identity than others, and to reinforce the need for engagement with popular culture content as normative.

The connection between popular culture and identity construction is further developed in a range of literature (Barker, 1997; Cheu, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008; Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) suggested the impact of popular culture on the construction of identity emerged through the relationships portrayed on television shows and movies. Notwithstanding her focus on the development of gay identity, the work made an important point on the place that popular culture plays in helping adolescents establish who they are, and in demonstrating the way that relationships provide a safe place for this exploration. She highlighted the connection between adolescents and the characters they interacted with in popular culture, which provided them with examples for their own development. The construction of adolescent identity was informed in part by role models that the young person encountered, and popular culture was able to provide a multitude of role models to

emulate (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008). Giddens noted that popular culture had changed the experiences that young people had as they sought to construct their identity. By breaking down the gap between real and imagined life and giving access to many different vicarious experiences, popular culture in its varied forms enabled young people to engage with a greater choice of examples. Durham (1998, 1999b) expressed concern that popular culture developed a tendency for young girls to be highly self-critical if they did not match the images presented, and that it was both the visual and the non-verbal presentation that gave girls a way of being.

2.7.4 Sources of Popular Culture

Important sources of popular culture for young people included print media (Johnson, 2007; McRobbie & McCabe, 1981), television (Barker, 1997, 1998; Charles, 2010b; Hylmo, 2006), movies (Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 2006; Tally, 2007) and music videos (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2006; Tiggeman & Slater, 2003). Print media, including magazines and comic books, are an important source of information for young girls (Carter, 1984; Hamilton, 2008; Harris, 2004a; Kearney, 2006). Fabrianesi, Jones, and Reid (2008) reported that up to 90% of young girls read magazines weekly, even though only 19% purchased them. Magazines are made accessible as girls share them, swap them and give them to each other, in a way that other media cannot be shared. In this way, print media is able to create a link between girls, informing and stimulating their conversations (Johnson, 2007). Girls read and talk about magazines that provide them with a plethora of ideas, responding not only to the constructed images and text but also to peer group opinions reinforcing the message given (Hamilton, 2008). Hamilton suggests that, due to the emphasis on girlfriend culture present in popular culture, group think becomes more important than individual thinking, and the group is a source of power within social interaction.

Girls read magazines that are targeted at older readers, including content about preparing for sexual activity and heterosexual relationships, and preparing for success in work places (Johnson, 2007). Fabrianesi et al. (2007) found that there was little difference between the content in magazines aimed at younger girls, and those aimed at adolescent girls. O'Brien (1997) reviewed one of the same magazines, 'Barbie', and noted the appropriation of the format and messages prevalent in similar

magazines for older audiences, including swimsuit poses, the concept of sexuality and the implication that to be successful one had to purchase the correct clothing and makeup. Steeped in the importance of having a Barbie doll, the magazine heavily advertised only one set of products and also presented strong messages about the way girls should behave and think in articles that focussed on how to have Barbie-style hair, and look like Barbie. Despite being aimed at a pre-pubescent audience, the focus of 'Barbie' was to highlight the need for girls to be sexual and look as others do. The content is presented as instructional material, providing what Hamilton (2008) described as "texts for living" (p. 90). Frequently, the discourse in magazines linked advice about relationships and appearance with the need to purchase particular cosmetics or clothes through a plethora of advertisements featuring beautiful females (Carter, 1984; Fabrianesi et al., 2008; Johnson, 2007; Walkerdine, 1997).

Consistent visual and non-visual messages manipulated the thinking and feelings of the reader and played into feelings of self-confidence and image as well as created social norms (Hamilton, 2008). Walkerdine (1997) suggested that the content of print media reinforced the expectation that girls needed to prepare themselves for their key heterosexual relationship. When analysing the content of fiction stories in a number of issues of two girl magazines, she found consistent messages about romance and the role of selfless helper, with an emphasis on the giving up of personal expectations to serve others. The fairy tale theme of happily-ever-after appeared in a variety of forms, even in comic stories which were thought to be radical. There was a clear division between the good and bad girl, and the rebellion of the bad girl was presented as a problem to be overcome, before a girl could really be successful. Kearney (2006) noted that few girl magazines feature articles about technology or information that supported taking an active role in their environment, instead guiding girls to remain passive in these contexts. Similarly, she found that, on analysis, the content of magazines continued to highlight the need for girls to focus on their bodies, to pursue relationships with males, and to ensure they behaved in ways that increased their appeal. While content might focus increasingly on gender-free topics there was still an emphasis on the personal aspects, rather than the technical aspects, of an activity. An example she noted was the inclusion of information about being in a band, rather than advice on how to set up a band.

When Fabrianesi, Jones, and Reid (2008) reviewed the content of four magazines, they found the text and images were dominated by a set of consistent celebrities who were either in film or music, or considered socialites. Details of their lifestyles, including alcohol and drug use, were glamourised (Fabrianesi, Jones, & Reid, 2008) and their appearance was reviewed and analysed regularly. Their research asserted that looking at the images, and sharing with other girls in conversation around these celebrities, potentially led to unhealthy social comparison around weight and appearance. This increased the influence the magazines had as instructional tools, reinforcing ideas that were re-created through interaction between girls. McRobbie and McCabe (1981) had previously found that gossip magazines created a pseudo-intimacy with young girls and celebrities by bringing details of their lives into everyday life. This potentially led to young girls identifying with celebrities, and constructing their own identity based on these reports of celebrity life.

Music videos and performers were an important cultural tool, defining groups and boundaries and providing a package of characteristics, including behaviours, language and appearance for adolescents to mirror in their behaviours (Giddens, 1991). Music videos have proliferated since the 1980s (Wallis, 2011) and there has been critical comment about the portrayal of women, as well as acknowledgement that there are positive messages and images in some videos. Wallis (2011) undertook a content analysis of music videos to build on earlier work and address gaps she perceived in earlier research. Her focus was to look at both performance and concept music videos, examining the portrayed roles, and gender displays, in the images. With the intent of clarifying the earlier work, she reviewed a total of 34 videos showing both female and male performers, collected over a period of 40 hours from the two key music channels in the USA, in 2004. Much of the power of music videos was in the use of non-verbal messages about gender rather than explicit verbal messages (Wallis, 2011). Appearance, gesture and background images, including the positioning and dress of backup singers, can give a contradictory message to the female performer who is singing of action and non-stereotypical behaviours. Wallis's findings indicated that there remained a strong stereotypical view of females in the content of music videos, despite an increased number of females contributing to the music field. While there

were some contradictions, highly gendered appearance and behaviours were consistently reinforced through music videos.

In other research looking at the connection between young women and music videos, there was evidence that young women felt connected to the visual images shown on music videos and watched them to learn social behaviours (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). Tiggeman and Slater found that, for young adult women, the watching of music videos increased their social comparison and body dissatisfaction. They worked with 84 Australian women and asked that they respond to a series of music videos, chosen because of their popularity with young women. All of the young women were between the ages of 18 to 30 and identified as in the upper-normal range of weight. Exploring how the persistent images of women in music videos, with an emphasis on thinness and sexuality, impacted on the self-perception of their sample, they identified that young women were less satisfied with their body after only short exposure time to music videos. Tiggemann and Slater (2003) concluded that music videos that present an idealised image of the female body, and sexualised behaviours, impacted negatively on the perception young women have of themselves. In a later study, Bell and Dittmar (2011) confirmed the impact of music video exposure on the self-image of young girls, but found that overall it was the exposure through a variety of media forms that created the impact on young girls. They did identify, however, that music videos had become a greater source of information about body image and appearance for some young girls than magazines, print media and television.

While body image may be affected by the females presented in music videos, the culture of music has been described as a support for girls playing out non-stereotypical roles and establishing identity. The individuality expressed by punk rock or hip hop artists allowed girls to be outspoken and radical as they took on performing roles in their own bands and with their own style (Harris, 2004a; Kearney, 2006). Performing in ways that contradicted traditional expectations for women became a way for girls to counter stereotyping and challenge perceptions (McCarthy, 2006). Female performers juxtaposed stereotypical costume and behaviour with radical lyrics and dance movements to challenge expectation and express their identities. The music offered the chance to be different and to challenge the traditional way that girls

performed music, although these girls were sometimes rejected by other girls for their difference. Groups such as 'Riot Girrl', formed in 1991, countered the traditional image of girls and music and highlighted girls who were strong, outspoken, violent, rebellious and able to own and control their own representations in popular culture (Harris, 2004a; Wald, 1998). The 'Spice Girls' also presented a powerful image of strong, can-do (Harris, 2004a) girls who achieved their dream and were able to express themselves in their own style. Current popular music stars, such as Gwen Stefani and Pink use their appearance, and their music, to support personal statements that challenge the views of what girls should look like and present themselves as non-gendered, taking on characteristics of both male and female expectations (McCarthy, 2006). McCarthy ascertains that these radical behaviours reflect current feminist theory, and express the position of young women now in society, allowing them the freedom of choice in terms of how to present themselves.

Building identity through music was the focus of work by Baker (2001) in a small study of pre-teen girls. Focusing on one of the participants, Baker highlighted that girls played seriously with music to shape their sense of self. She noticed that her focus girl, Rosa, not only followed music trends and responded to the images presented in terms of behaviour and dress, but also created her own music against recorded music, using it as both an accompaniment and a lead to her singing and dancing. This was consistent across the girls she studied, although Rosa was the strongest example. Music provided an avenue for self-expression, as well as a model to follow. Dance gave space for a physical response that expressed individuality. The concept that music videos or performances afford young girls an important opportunity to connect to identities and to express their own individuality is also evident in other literature (Kearney, 2006; Wald, 1998).

Movies and television have been identified as important sources of information for adolescent girls to learn about social practices and norms, presenting storylines focused on love and appearance, career choices and social skills and family life and expectations (Cheu, 2007; Driscoll, 2002; Hylmo, 2006; Tally, 2007; Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005). The storylines suggest ways to conform with social expectation, and have the power to suggest that they create the culture rather than comment on it

(Driscoll, 2002). For young girls who are avid watchers of both television and movies, these visual sources of popular culture provide a backdrop to their lives that informs their conversations, choices and identity development. Teenage movies and television shows continue to have high school settings, prevalent since the 1950s when education became more accessible for girls, highlighting the place the school environment has in the development of identity (Driscoll, 2002). For adolescent girls, school is the place that offers them the chance to try different identities, to explore a way of being and to share with their peers their ideas of how to be, including learning the power of the peer group and the need to conform.

Girls have long been considered a key audience for movies because, since the 1950s they have had both the time and the money to attend movie theatres, tending to watch movies in groups (Hylmo, 2006; Nash, 2006). This generated a sense of togetherness and shared aspiration and supported social behaviours that included imitating the fashions and behaviours in the movies in their own lives. As visual popular culture, movies and television shows tell stories about other women, both fictional and factual, that provide girls with examples of what other women do and feel in their lives. They offer alternate roles and ways to be, and examples of relationships and skills that young girls can use to inform their own development and to compare their own lives against (Martin, 1994; Tally, 2007). The realities presented on film are ubiquitous and appear to be truth, providing fantasy everyday situations that girls perceive as possible and natural because they can imagine themselves in the same situation (Driscoll, 2002; Hylmo, 2006; Martin, 1994). The female characters are idealised and fit within an acceptable range of behaviour, with a focus on romance, appearance and conformity that teach girls how to be girls with a specific look and set of behaviours (Driscoll, 2002).

Television shows serve to reinforce the roles presented in films, and are easily accessed by girls in their daily lives. In the period of time when television became predominant in homes across western cultures, the initial representation of females included family-oriented women who spent their time caring for family in domestic settings and who were not recognised as having knowledge about anything beyond the home. The female characters who were not immersed in domestic positions were

women with supernatural features, often presented as fantasy characters able to solve problems for the male characters. Shows with single career women as the key character were not created until the 1970s when Mary Tyler Moore—a clever, smart character—was the focus of her own show, surrounded by other ordinary female characters (Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005). These career women were standout characters, who met norms of beauty and were single women who eschewed family life, thus setting themselves apart from other women (Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005). Zuckerman and Dubowitz suggested that this has not changed, even though popular culture shows a more diverse occupational narrative for women. Despite the greater diversity of female characters represented on television, the connection between success and the need to be thin and traditionally beautiful has persisted (Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005).

The portrayal of females on television in both fictional and reality shows, as well as identities who attract media attention because of their behaviour and social antics, can be recognised as sexually driven and anti-intellectual (Kristjansson, 2008). Zuckerman and Dubowitz (2005) suggested that, despite these strong images of women, there continued to be a negative message about women as sexual objects even as they portray non-traditional characters in previously masculine dominated careers such as medical or detective employment. They argued that while there are good role models for girls portraying successful women in non-traditional activity evident on television and in movies, young girls do not see themselves in these characters and so do not identify with them, either in terms of appearance or intelligent behaviours. Oprah Winfrey is an example of a woman who has achieved both media and financial success and she has been able to build a strong identity, resulting in her being identified as an effective role model for young girls. However, Zuckerman and Dubowitz (2005) noted that adolescent girls do not see themselves in Oprah, as her capacities and style appear beyond their reach.

In a study of the females in reality television shows, Brown (2005) identified that the strong women were also the nasty women on the screen, and that despite the intent of producers to select women who were not stereotypical in terms of race, gender or class, the final cuts that went to air reflected the embedded social discourses and

showed women who, in a competitive situation, were bitchy, manipulative and cruel to other women in order to be successful. Her research recognised three further key themes present in the final cut across the range of reality shows currently on television. Older women were shown to use their age, and perceived caring nature, to nurture relationships with younger women that in the end used the younger women to maintain their own status. Women of diverse cultural backgrounds were under-represented in the shows overall, with a predominance of blonde, thin, traditionally beautiful girls as the featured players. The third theme reflected traditional gender lines when groups were divided into gender-based teams. Female teams were disorganised, bitchy and not task focused while the male teams were task focused and bonded quickly in order to complete the challenge. In an interesting juxtaposition, Brown noted that the team behind the popular show, 'Survivor' (Mark Burnett Productions, 2000), was better able to manage diverse perspectives and included many women who broke stereotyped approaches to work, power and femininity. Reality television is becoming a major genre that is influential and purports to portray people as they are through its reality tag. The messages about women and their identities and social roles are powerful because of this tag, which belies the constructed nature of the shows, and as such reinforces the messages that adolescent girls understand from other visual media sources.

2.7.5 Life Roles

Girls continue to be positioned in contradictory roles in current visual media, ranging from the strong hero who is able to overcome fantasy monsters while retaining her neat appearance, to the girl who overcomes a socially difficult childhood to be both successful and beautiful in a socially acceptable way (Driscoll, 2002). 'Girl power', first highlighted through the 'Spice Girls' in the early 1990s (Fritzche, 2004; Harris, 2004a), presented a message of strong, empowered girls able to build their own place in the world, look after themselves and achieve their own goals because feminism had created the situation where they were able to do this. However, critiques of the 'Spice Girls' reflected their use of 'girliness' that reinforced an emphasis on the body, and conformity to notions of beauty and thinness that contradicted the concept of individuality and valorised only some girls (Durham, 2003; Fritzche, 2004). Heroic girls were physically strong and capable but still met expectations of beauty and size,

which reinforced traditional expectations for girls, rather than celebrated the diversity of real girls.

A key player in the portrayal of girls in movies aimed at girls is the Disney company, which targets an audience of young girls, as it claims a guardian role with regard to traditional values (Cheu, 2007). Disney movies continue to reinforce the traditional roles of girls through the portrayal of female characters in stereotypical roles. Consistently, female characters in Disney movies aspired to marriage and sought a male hero to rescue them. The Disney princesses promoted values of beauty and gentleness as they waited for their prince to come. While recent Disney movies include more robust female characters who begin with a rebellious approach to expectations by displaying non-traditional views on appearance and behaviour, the final solution to the challenges and problems is often the result of a rescue and a change in manner to maintain a relationship with a young male (Cheu, 2007). Many movies made in the late 1990s through to the early 2000s continued the focus on the interests of adolescent girls, who were recognised as key consumers of both movies and television. Over this period many of the female characters were strong, powerful and confident, able to achieve feats of strength and to resolve problems using both force and intelligence. These characters were able to behave in non-traditional ways, while continuing to look beautiful in the traditional sense. They demonstrated physical skills and behaviours that highlighted the strength of females and their capacity to defend themselves although this also suggested a breakdown of supportive relationships.

Rather than portray the sisterhood evident in many earlier movies, where girls relied heavily on each other for strength and security, modern girl heroes in movies tended to be more individualistic and worked to achieve their own goals, sometimes at the cost of friendship (Tally, 2007). Increased aggressive behaviour between and among adolescent girls has drawn attention in the popular media, with the emergence of the terms 'queen bee' and 'mean girl' in language (Chmelynski, 2006) and the publishing of literature in the popular press that described the behaviour of adolescent girls in these terms. This was reinforced by the production of 'Mean Girls' (Paramount Pictures, USA, 2004), a popular culture movie that was cited as a study of the

relationships between girls in school settings, and took a comedic approach to the way girls relate to each other (Simmons, 2010). The characters and the way they responded to each other demonstrated examples of cruel and manipulative behaviours. Remillard and Lamb (2005) suggested that there were many images of violence in popular culture that supported claims that it was socially appropriate for girls to relate to each other in aggressive ways. They found that friendship, and its fluidity during adolescence, was a key factor in demonstrated aggression between girls. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) drew from the findings of a larger study to explore aggression among a group of girls, aged from 11 to 16 years. They did not specifically identify a connection between characters in popular culture and increased aggression between the girls. Behaviours that the girls described as mean, including physical violence and emotional aggression, were more often about establishing and maintaining social popularity than a reflection of the characters and behaviours they saw in popular culture. It was not evident from their reporting that the girls themselves drew connections between how they saw women behaving in the media and their understanding of the way to relate to others. However, connections could be drawn between the manipulative behaviours noted in the media analysis of Signorelli (1997) and the evidence of increased aggression accepted as normal by adolescent girls as described by Currie et al. (2007) and Remillard and Lamb (2005).

Movies also send a powerful message about the power of sexuality as a mechanism for achieving goals for women (Signorelli, 1997; Tally, 2007). Many female characters use their sexuality to manipulate those around them to achieve their goals and the need to cultivate the 'right' appearance in order to achieve work-related goals is an important secondary theme in many movies with a female lead. Hylmo (2006) analysed 18 films made between 2000 and 2005, each with a high school-age female and with a predicted adolescent, or younger, audience. Although her study was limited to only a small sample of movies, and the research audience was actually adults rather than a group in the perceived audience age, the study identified overall themes that included messages about relying on your father for protection, finance and advocacy, and behaving passively rather than proactively about life choices. While the movies suggested that girls were able to take up creative careers, they did not provide a realistic image of the hard work and background required to be

successful in these careers and suggested that only some girls were able to achieve what they aspired to do. The findings indicated an overall disregard for women needing substantive skills, or academic background or learning, in order to be successful. In 'Legally Blonde' (MGM, 2001), the main character uses her femininity in a sexualised way to overcome prejudice in both the academic and the legal world. The audience responds to her over-feminised behaviour rather than her intellectual ability and the contradiction she presents is resolved in the traditional way—she gets her man.

Few of the characters shown in movies or on television present an intellectual or academically gifted identity (Inness, 2007). On Australian television, the character of Ja'ime King ('Summer Heights High', Princess Pictures, 2007- present) was a satirical representation of a gifted teenage girl—a 'supergirl'—who was not only able to perform academically while in school but also achieve in sport, community work and popularity. Satire makes social comment using humour and contradiction, juxtaposing the expected with the unexpected and, in this example, presenting the gifted girl as arrogant, selfish and difficult. While the intent of the creator of Ja'ime's character was to explore a fascination with supergirls (Charles, 2010b), the end result belittled this sort of girl, and suggested a connection between intelligence and a lack of morality. The character also denied her ability, and the television show actually highlighted the need for gifted adolescent girls to juggle their ability with popularity and suggested that, to maintain a high level of achievement, a gifted girl needs to become both selfish and somewhat arrogant. Because the commentary is couched in humour it can be perceived as a less-than-true image, but for gifted adolescent girls seeking to establish themselves such a presentation provides a message that sensitive gifted girls may well read more deeply than expected.

Paule (2007) described a contrasting depiction of gifted girls shown on popular culture. These girls were "superslackers" (p. 85), deliberately denying or misrepresenting their ability to create their own pathway. Her description of these "reluctant heroines" (p. 85) included girls who played down their ability or eschewed the possibilities open to them and chose careers or activities that did not require them to demonstrate their ability. Many of the girl characters she identified lived in a world

where the supernatural was possible, and Paule suggested that these were girls who had discovered their power and self-managed it as a sign of independence. She argued that this in fact may be more representative of real life for gifted girls.

The girls she described would align with the profile of the ‘invisible underachiever’, described by Betts and Neihart (2010). Superslacker adolescent girls had an inconsistent profile, underperforming in academic tasks but applying their talent in community or humanitarian spheres. Paule also suggested that while these girls could be seen as representative of third wave feminism, in that they were able to make choices in their own lives, they may not have fully understood the way society was actually constraining their choices, limiting their potential and forcing them to behave in certain ways. For the audience of girls, the message was that they were only able to fully achieve their talent potential in local spheres or community engagement.

Gifted children are sensitive to the contradictory images that present giftedness as a positive experience. Hebert and Neumeister (2002) identified movies that featured gifted children, suggesting that these movies were often mundane and stereotyped, avoiding the conflicting issues that gifted young people might perceive in popular culture generally. In relation to roles presented in popular culture, and with their increased sense of perception, gifted adolescents read more into the message presented than intended. Few movies or television shows feature gifted characters specifically. Because of this, the movies did not necessarily inform young gifted girls about their lives and issues, nor offer ideas for how to be a gifted girl in the adolescent world.

2.8 Impact on Behaviour

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) surveyed 900 adolescents between 14 and 16 years of age in Australian schools and found that girls felt pressured to know current information from and about popular culture, as it formed the basis of conversation, was a guide for physical appearance, and was crucial for popularity, regardless of levels of academic ability or performance. The portrayal of real people as characters in the media, including people such as Paris Hilton, can confuse the line between reality and fantasy and provide girls with contradictory images of what it is to be a

successful girl (Durham, 2003). Many female stars popular with adolescent girls appear not only as fictional characters in movies or television, but also appear in advertising as themselves, selling beauty products and confusing the line between reality and fiction. Despite the characters they play in movies or television shows, they become advocates for traditional beauty products and appearance (Durham, 2003), presenting conflicting messages to their fans.

The concept of being a fan reflects the impact of the omnipresent place of popular culture in the lives of adolescent girls. Magazines and other media constantly provide advice and opportunity for girls to connect with their idols, and describe personal details of their idols as a way of knowing them intimately. Young girls embrace the clothing, moves and sound of their preferred idols to express their identity (Harris, 2004a; Kearney, 2006). Fritzche (2004) explored the responses of girls who were fans of the 'Spice Girls' through an interview study. In a small study of eight interviews and one discussion group with girls between the ages of 10 to 17 years in Germany, she explored how they responded to their icons in terms of behaviour and self-image, and how their passion for the group impacted on their actions. She found that being a fan meant that an individual collected the works of the idol, talked about them, tried out their fashion styles, and imitated the moves and actions of the groups or individuals. Taking on the role of fan provided opportunity to try different identities and a "toolbox" (Fritzche, 2004, p. 159) of ways to be. Fritzche concluded that being a fan actually supported a stronger sense of self when it was mimetic, because it offered the chance to copy and individualise a look or behaviour, while at the same time using the idol as a reference point. This conclusion emerged through work that focused on the 'Spice Girls', who despite critique about their girlishness and the constructed nature of their group, continue to be seen as powerful positive role models for young girls due to their diversity and strong personalities.

Kristanjonsson (2008) expressed concerns about more recent icons presented across the range of popular culture and idolised by adolescent girls. Her study focused on Paris Hilton, who at the time of her work, appeared regularly on television and in magazines as a hero of popular culture. Her hedonistic behaviours gave rise to 'Hiltonism', which Kristanjonsson (2008) described as self-centred, raunchy, anti-

intellectual and fun behaviours that have become a collective role model for young girls. Nash (2006) suggested that there is a narrative cycle in the media that sees popular culture stars deliberately and strategically visible in many sources as a way of embedding their place in popular culture. Many celebrities are frequently shown both in their real lives, and in their acted roles, with an applauded, carefully manicured appearance or a criticised ordinary appearance that reinforces the importance of the need to be always beautiful and sexy (Tally, 2007), even if they have children. The subtle message given to young girls is that motherhood is the focus of women's lives, with a career a sideline, and that it is most important to look good, have a male partner and not be concerned with intellectual activity (Durham, 2003). A further contrast is presented when the young actors, shown as happy with their children and families, appear in movies as high-flying career women who are unhappy with their lives, and spend time seeking a partner of the opposite gender (Tally, 2007). Seeing their idols portrayed in both fictional and real roles that sometimes contradict each other makes it difficult to distinguish the role to aspire to.

2.9 Conclusion

Harris (2004b) suggested that “the image of the successful assertive girl in control of her own destiny has become central to the entertainment industries” (p. 21) and the literature overall confirmed this. The fictional characters presented through visual, print and music media, and the personalities who feature in these media as both fictional and real characters, sell these ideas to young girls. Images of girls still help to sell products and ideas to the general population, including males, using their appearance and the concept of sex appeal to attract attention. However, in current popular culture, female characters and personalities sell specific ideas of girlhood to adolescent girls about their role and lives that influence the way that girls see themselves. These ideas focus strongly on sexuality, appearance, relationships and social behaviours and do not promote the concept of intelligence or academic achievement. They have been consistent over a long period of time, despite and in contradiction to, the messages of feminism around the importance of girls achieving because of who they are, not what they look like. There is a paucity of literature that examines the relationships gifted girls have with media and its impact on their identity and self-concept.

Messages in the media tell all girls to be beautiful, to use their beauty and sex appeal to get their own way, and that they will achieve success by looking and behaving in these ways. Important and influential characters that girls relate to are young and quickly successful, due largely to their appearance and the manipulation of their image in popular culture. Their images become synonymous with stereotypes of girl. The literature identified a number of recurring themes and messages about and for adolescent girls across print, visual and music media. Girls must be thin, conform to an ideal beauty, wear the right clothes and behave in assertive and confident ways. Girls must work to fit expectations, and can be helped by older mentors who can train them to behave correctly. Relationships with other girls serve the purpose of helping to achieve individual goals and are often fraught with competition. Using their femininity to attract attention, girls then manipulate males to achieve their own purpose. It is important to seek and display a male partner, and eventually, children, but returning to your pre-child figure and lifestyle is also important. It is acceptable to work, but work is a means to finding the right man and being supported. Girls do not aspire to leading careers, although they are able to achieve career success without hard and persistent work. Life is best for girls when they are in a relationship and do not have to manage their own lives.

Pipher (1994) suggested that girls needed saving from the world of popular culture, and that society needed to support their individual growth as people, not mimetic copies of the characters they engage with in popular culture. In popular culture there is considerable content about choice and independence, success and careers with little emphasis on the cognitive abilities needed to achieve these. Intellectual behaviour and academic capacity do not really feature in any of the messages provided in any form of popular culture. Popular culture is a powerful medium and reinforces its messages in multiple forms. It tells of women who are able to work in diverse places, and to interact with fellow workers of either gender to achieve goals. While this is a key message of feminism, it is the visual image of how you need to look to be able to achieve this and the advice to young girls about taking charge and enacting their own aspirations that sometimes contradicts feminist goals. However, popular culture appears not to present a message that supports adolescent gifted girls being academic or intellectual in their behaviours or character as described in the literature discussed

earlier around giftedness and gifted girls. The literature on gifted girls constructed a different view, describing girls who were at odds with themselves and forced to make choices between their ability and their social activity (Gross, 1989).

Popular culture challenges girls by presenting them with a diverse selection of characters who suggest ways of being. It contradicts its messages across different forms of media, and delivers strong messages about the importance of appearance for success and about the roles women play in the world. Literature suggested that as young girls establish their identity they use the material in popular culture to inform their choices and shape themselves to emulate the celebrities who are frequently evident in the media. There was contradiction in the literature around the position that young girls take in terms of the information available. Young girls are identified as vulnerable passive consumers unable to critically discriminate between various ideas suggested and therefore highly influenced by the messages given both explicitly and subtly. But young girls are also suggested to be increasingly active consumers and producers of media, using it to express their views on the world. From both perspectives, the importance of popular culture in the lives of young girls is evident in the literature. As a tool for information and as a place to express ideas, the literature suggests that popular culture has an impact on the way that young girls view themselves and their world.

It becomes problematic when the type of girl evident in the media becomes the only way to be a girl. Gifted girls are not presented in the media for their gifts alone. They are shown as oddities, problem solvers, different, and in the majority of instances, required to conform to the popular interpretation of beauty and appearance to be able to fully manifest their gifted behaviours. Their talent can only be appreciated when they fit in with the accepted norms. These messages powerfully tell young girls that their academic talent will only be accepted if they are able to be normal in other ways. However, current literature also indicates that some young girls are able to critically read and view popular culture, and make choices about their response to the messages presented. They are able to utilise what popular culture affords them in terms of positioning to establish their own stance.

2.10 Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature review for this study explored a number of distinct focus areas. Literature from a feminist perspective provided background for the methodology of the study but also informed the understanding of the current position of girls with regard to social expectation and positioning. It highlighted that diversity is, for young girls and women, a crucial feature of their identity development. A greater emphasis on finding one's own way, establishing oneself as an individual and aspiring to be successful, is evident in the third wave/post-feminist literature. The need for power, both personal and in the workplace, continued to be a factor for success as a female. Following this background literature, three distinct areas of literature were reviewed. Giftedness and talent development was the first focus in the review. A constant struggle within the field of gifted education has been to establish a definition of giftedness that is consistent across the field. Literature revealed two distinct approaches to understanding giftedness, one focusing on the whole child and the other on the performance of the gifted child. More recent literature challenged this dichotomous approach and suggested both aspects needed to be addressed to support the achievement of potential. This can be seen in many of the models of talent development that were then examined in the review. Gagné's DMGT (2008) model became the framework of the research, providing components that supported the review of data. However, the review identified some gaps in this model that were deemed important for this research. Gagné's model is not gender specific and as such did not acknowledge the issues of positioning and social expectation identified in the feminist literature. Models that focused specifically on the talent development of women provided elements that were considered essential, including personal aspiration and sense of purpose, community or global demonstration of talent, the importance of having a strong sense of self to overcome societal barriers, and the support of a number of influences. None of the models, however, identified the impact of popular culture as a catalyst in talent development. This was a gap that needed to be addressed.

A search for Australian research on the lived experience of adolescent girls in rural Australia revealed a dearth of literature that examined their talent development or their lived experiences. While there has been some examination of giftedness in rural

settings in an American context, this did not necessarily reflect the Australian rural environment. Gifted adolescents in rural settings are diverse, in small clusters and not identified for appropriate programming. The literature review revealed a gap in the understanding of the lived experience of gifted adolescent girls in rural Australia.

An abundance of literature examined the impact of popular culture on all girls. Over time, much of the design of popular culture content has been aimed at young girls, who in the early days of cinema, music media and magazines, were a key audience. It was clear in this literature that popular culture was an important influence on the developing identity of young girls, providing them with information, advice, images and role models. However, across this literature neither ability nor giftedness was identified as a variable that played a part in the results more than occasionally. It raised a question of whether gifted girls responded in different ways to the messages delivered through the media.

The review of the literature exposed three key gaps that this research will address. Talent development models have not identified popular culture as a singular, important catalyst in the development of talent despite the abundant literature exploring its impact on young people. Gifted girls in rural Australia have not been a focus of research that provides a description of their lived experience, their school lives and the way they develop a sense of themselves as talented. While the relationship girls have with popular culture has often been examined in a range of contexts, ability or giftedness has not commonly been recognised as a variable in the responses.

Chapter 3: Method

This chapter sets out the conduct of the research, explaining initially the design of the project, followed by an explanation of the reasoning behind the data collection and concluding with detail of the data analysis. A final section will consider the limitations of the design.

3.1 Introduction

This research aimed to examine how the images presented in popular culture acted as environmental catalysts on the talent development process of adolescent gifted girls in rural Australia. It is an exploratory study of adolescent gifted girls and their engagement with, and responses to, popular culture in their lives. It explored how this phenomenon informed their choices and either supported or disrupted the development of their talent.

The key research question was:

In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls?

A further three sub-questions informed the data gathering and on analysis, provided responses to the key research question. These sub-questions are identified below.

1. *How do rural gifted girls respond to the concepts presented to them in popular culture?*
2. *How does what they say about themselves as 'gifted' reflect what they see in popular culture?*
3. *How does their response to popular culture change at significant points in their lives?*

3.2 Research Design

The intention of this research was to explore the ideas, thoughts and feelings that adolescent gifted girls had about the images in popular culture, knowing that popular culture is a major source of information and modelling for young people (Harris, 2004a; Pecora & Mazzeralla, 1999; Walkerdine, 1997). Integral to this was discussion about their self-image and identity, and how they see their future. With this intent

clear, a qualitative approach aiming to explore the feelings and responses of adolescent gifted girls when engaging with the images and messages made sense.

In response to the nature of the research questions, this research adopted a feminist case study design. Yegedis and Weinbach (2006) suggested that feminist research allowed for an open, less formal relationship between researcher and participants, and that it could be designed to have an emergent nature, responding to the ideas and information being discovered in the process. In keeping with their approach, the research was designed to use a variety of methods of data generation that were open-ended and allowed for exploration of the emerging responses of rural gifted girls rather than the testing of a set of hypotheses. Strategies of analysis included reflexive analysis of the impact of the researcher on the conversations and the responses of the researcher to the emerging stories.

Because the questions asked 'how' and the information sought was to be descriptive, the research was designed as a case study (Yin, 1994). An exploratory intent allowed for the research to begin with the purpose of finding out more about adolescent gifted girls. It would finally present a picture of their experiences and interactions with popular culture, their view of self as gifted and their vision for their futures. This would inform the final response to the research question. There was very little research on gifted girls in rural Australia evident in the literature search carried out in the initial stages of the study. In this way the project met two of the conditions suggested by Yegedis and Weinbach (2006): firstly, that little was known about the area being studied; and, secondly, the participants were selected according to their willingness to participate in the research. In research designed as case study, the intent is to generate a clear description of the case, building deep understanding of an entity (Stake, 2006) that has interested the researcher, and is believed to be important for social understanding.

Based then on theories of feminism, identity and talent development, and using a constructivist approach, the research was designed as feminist case study. The exploratory nature of this research defined the boundaries of the design. The central case to be examined was that of rural gifted adolescent girls and their responses to, and views of, popular culture and its messages about achievement and giftedness,

with reference to their own talent development. Multiple cases embedded in the design allowed for specific exploration of the sub-questions. The multiple cases were based on age, with a case group of girls in Year 7/8 and a second group of Year 10/11 girls. Embedded within the case groups were three further groups; the girls came from either School A, or School B, and individuals were interviewed after a process of initial data analysis to substantiate responses to the questions. Yin (1994) warned that embedded case studies are at risk of becoming more focused on the individual cases than the overall big picture case, and this was addressed by a second round of analysis that constructed a full story of the experience of gifted adolescent girls from across all the groups. The embedded cases were used to provide deeper responses to the questions and to allow a form of member checking that validated the first stories discovered. Figure 3.1 on the following page provides a full illustration of the design of the research.

Inside the bounds of the case to be studied were the responses of the girls to popular culture in relation to their identity formation, their understanding of giftedness and their aspirations towards their futures. The analysis sought to establish whether popular culture supported or disrupted the talent development process and to find this information within the data. Outside the case were other elements of their lives that at times entered discussion and so are acknowledged, but as external to the case, have not been deeply examined in the analysis. These elements included family and home life, paid work and hobbies, religion, and relationships with the opposite gender.

Young girls exploring their responses required a feminist approach. Because the identification of participants provided an identity for all girls that they had not had before (that of being gifted), identity theory informed some of the project. Finally, because the project sought to examine the impact of popular culture on the aspirations and goals of gifted girls, existing theories of talent development informed the design and the analysis. An overall framework of constructivism was appropriate for this study as it aimed to construct, with the participants, the stories of the relationships between gifted girls and popular culture, in their own words. The research drew on these four frameworks in its design, implementation and analysis (see Figure 3.2).

In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls?

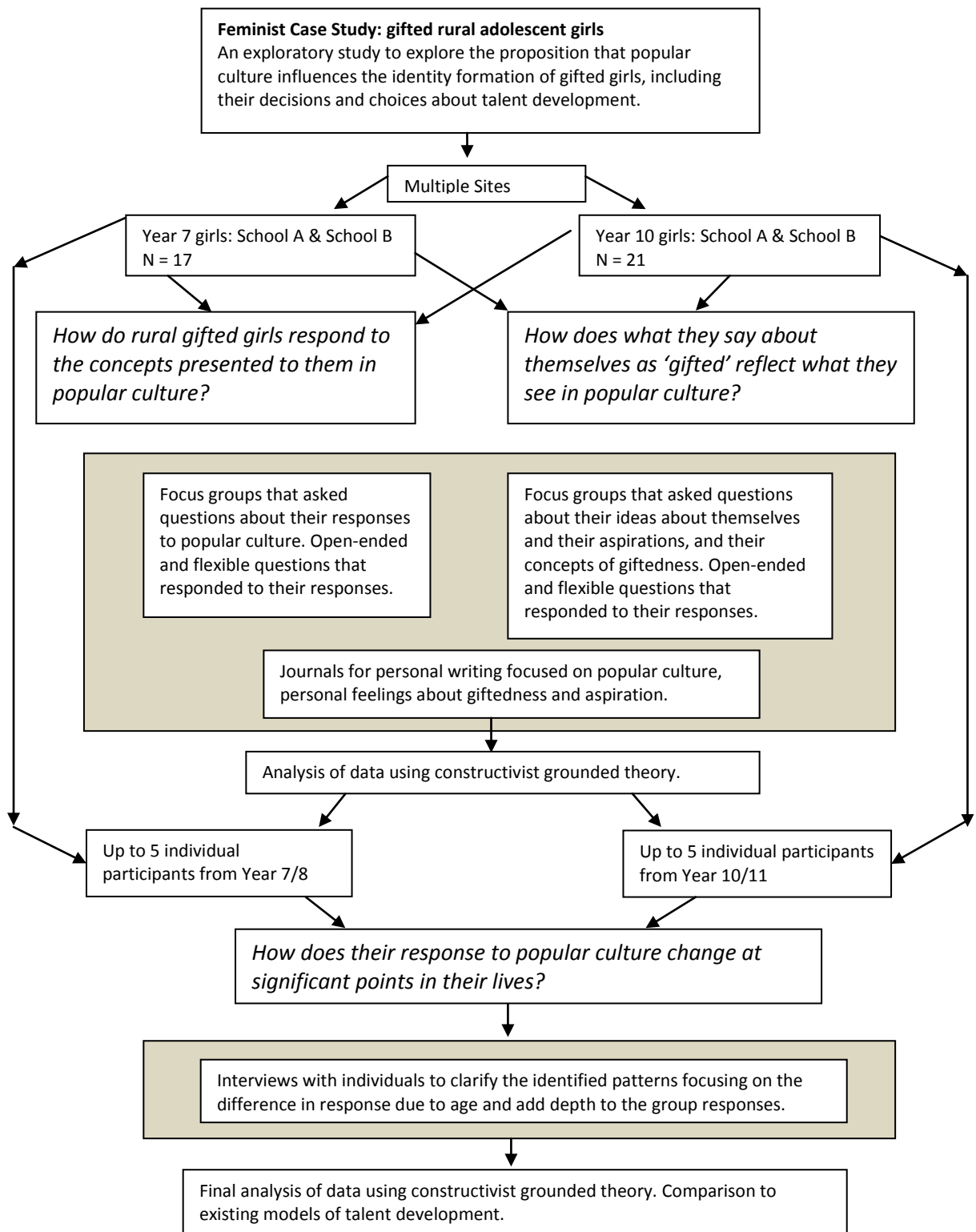


Figure 3.1: Diagram of research design

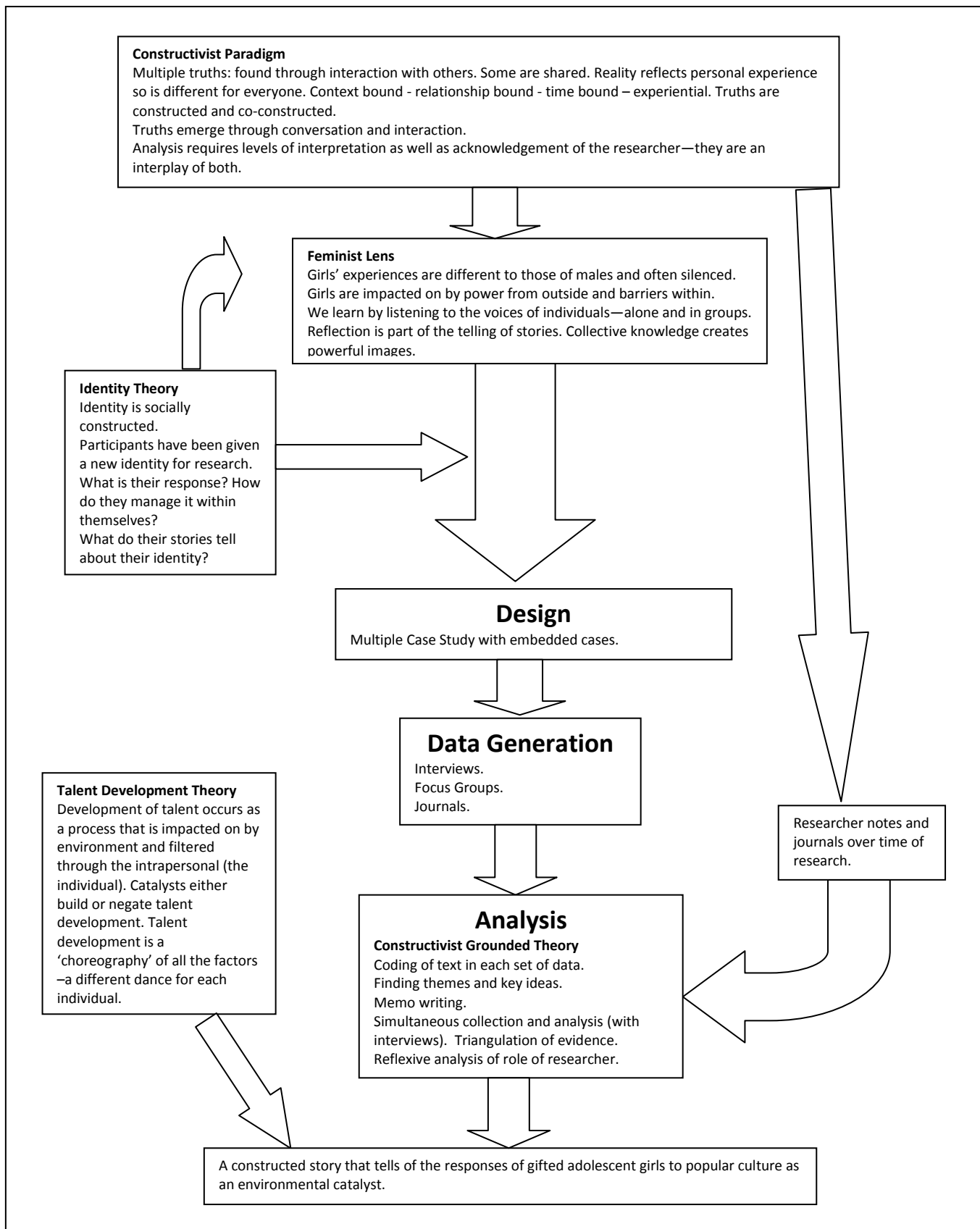


Figure 3.2: Research design showing use of four frameworks

3.2.1 A Constructivist Research Framework

The overarching framework of any research design reflects the beliefs of the researcher about reality, knowledge and its development. Research designed with a constructivist framework is built on the premise that reality is subjective and knowledge is constructed by each individual, through experience and interaction, and shared to create new realities that are part individual, part group and part cultural (Charmaz, 2006; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006b). The researcher and participant co-construct reality, with the researcher not playing the role of an objective outsider but rather noting their own involvement with, and responses to, the participants (Duggleby, 2005; Ghezeljeh & Emami, 2009).

In this way, the relationship between researcher and participant is reciprocal with a different balance of power than traditional research. This relationship is crucial, as it is the responses that are evoked by the interactions within the researcher as well as the interactions between the researcher and participants and all members of the group, that form the basis of the theory developed. Both parties (researcher and participant) are shaped by each other and their reality changed during the process, which could be seen as a learning one. Research in a constructivist framework is responsive. The interplay between researcher and participant may change the direction of the ideas emerging and because of this the data can be described as being generated rather than collected (Duggleby, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006a).

3.2.2 A Feminist Approach

This project was based within feminist research, with a clear focus on what girls see in the popular culture with which they engage. Feminism is a collective approach to research and exploration of feeling, response and interaction (Porter, 1991). This was a key principle for this research: each gifted girl had different experiences and an individual response to popular culture that evolved from their sense of self, their personal environmental context, and their aspiration that contributed to the joint picture created as they talked together. Exploring the differential impact of popular culture on identities, aspirations, and finally, talent development, would provide a description of the identity development of gifted girls. For this research, popular

culture was defined as an environmental catalyst (Gagné, 2008). A feminist stance acknowledged that women/girls struggle to be who they are and that the struggle is impacted upon by what is around them in their environment. Because its intent was to focus on the impact of popular culture on female identity and the achievement of potential, this project sits within a qualitative, feminist approach.

Feminist research is identified by its emphasis on the importance of the female voice as it ensures that the different perspective of women is heard (Beasley, 1999). It serves to foreground women's experience and to allow them to articulate the conflicts that they have with their femaleness and their place in society (Rimmer, 2002). Importance is placed on relationships and connections through social interaction and in social settings, with the inclusion of the researcher as part of the process, not as an outsider (Holland & Ramazanoglu, in Holland & Blair, 1995). A critical reflection is required of the various relationships formed while the research is undertaken, drawing out the picture of the network and its impact on subsequent conversations. Exploring the view that adolescent gifted girls held of their ability and their future required opportunities for open discussion and shared conversation. There was a need for spontaneity and personal reflection, for talking about lives and noting differences and similarities, and for trying on new roles and evaluating how it felt. Thus, it seemed obvious that the appropriate tools to undertake this work would include small, familiar groups; opportunity for self-reflection and writing; and chances to talk outside a group to the researcher.

3.2.3 Theories of Identity

Giftedness is not formally identified in many schools in New South Wales and so it was acknowledged that this research, in identifying relevant participants, may well challenge the identity of these participants. Informing the design, then, is the notion that participants could well be addressing a new label for themselves as they participate. Identity is constructed socially through a series of stories and anecdotes and the creation of personal meanings (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000) that allow the individual to draw connections between their external environment and their internal conceptions of self. The diversity of networks that individuals operate in results in a set of identities that are held according to the setting. However, there will

be a salient identity to which the individual is most committed that forms a central view of self and is manifested in a set of behaviours that are shaped by a social network (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As well, identity forms through the meanings that an individual applies to the many roles they play in their social world transformed into behaviours (Stryker & Burke, 2000). According to Erikson(1968), adolescents face a conflict of identity and seek to establish a salient identity. For girls, literature identified that the process of establishing their identity was a cyclical, long-term process, involving an extended period of moratorium or identity diffusion (Luyckx et al., 2006; Moshman, 2005). The design of the research both acknowledged and was informed by these theories. A qualitative approach enabled an exploration of the identity expressed by the participants, through an analysis of the themes and emergent ideas in ongoing conversation with a social group formed for this purpose. It was important to allow opportunity for personal reflection by participants and an internal exploration of their responses to the meaning of being a gifted person. Utilising focus groups and interviews to provide opportunity for interaction and thus stories and anecdotes that endorse an identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), as well as journals to offer a space for personal reflection, ensured the design of the research addressed the issues of identity formation relevant for its purpose.

3.2.4 Theories of Talent Development

Theories of talent development attempt to explain why in any field of endeavour there will be a range of levels of achievement and performance, and how the uppermost level of excellence in performance may come about. The research analysis was undertaken on a foundation of the theory of talent development devised by Gagné (1985, 2008) that explained talent as the end result of a systematic process of development that may include training, coaching, learning, practice and experience. Catalysts within the environment impact both positively and negatively on the process of development and are also filtered through the experiences of each individual, creating a set of intrapersonal catalysts. There is no differentiation in this theory for the impact of gender. By designing the research as case study, the intent was to highlight the impact of popular culture as a pervasive environmental catalyst and to examine how it supported or disrupted the talent development process. Exploring this concept would provide insight into the development of a view of self as talented. The

guiding questions presented in both the focus groups and the interviews served to bring attention to the way the participants perceived their talent development. Constructivist grounded theory as the tool for data analysis explored the stories found in the data and made use of the reflexive responses of the researcher to examine the insights and ideas that emerged. The final story constructed from the research told the story of talent development for these girls at this time.

3.3 The Site

The site for this research was a regional city in a regional area of New South Wales, Australia, located approximately 250 kilometres from the nearest major metropolitan centre and west of the Blue Mountains, which form a considerable divide in the state of New South Wales. The population is close to 41,000 (estimate from 2013 Bathurst Regional Council area Estimated Resident Population figures, <http://profile.id.com.au/bathurst/population-estimate>). It has a daily air service, and is linked by train and bus to the major metropolitan centre. It is set on a major road and transport route within the state and considerable traffic passes through the city each day. The central hub, the original settlement of the city (population approximately 7,000), is surrounded by a number of villages, two of which have grown to blend in with the outer edges of the city. Within 50 kilometres there are ten villages, some of which are home for workers in the city and others which provide agricultural produce and tourist features for visitors. There is a similar size regional city 55 kilometres west of the centre.

Originally a strong agricultural area, with large land-holdings for raising sheep, cattle and horses, the largest single industry in the city is education. However, there are also major contributions to the local economy through fruit and vegetable production, including a cannery, processing plants for both fish and pet food and a range of government departments and community services, servicing areas around and into the western region of the state. On the eastern side of the town is a large industrial area, which includes a range of industries. Other businesses include tourist sites and sporting fixtures and arenas. During the year there are major nationwide sporting events held in the city. These form part of its identity.

Cultural activities are strong in the city, with a regional art gallery and well-known artists producing from the area. Drama and live theatre are produced locally and the local theatre hosts a variety of visiting performers and performances. An annual eisteddfod draws entrants from across the area and includes a full program of presentations. The local conservatorium of music offers tuition in a range of instruments, voice and a variety of choirs. This ensures there are myriad opportunities for those with gifts in the creative arts as well as sporting activities.

It is a centre of education, with a wide range of school education providers, including a large institution for technical and further education and a tertiary institution. While there are two single-sex secondary schools and two independent schools in the city, this research focuses on the public sector. The public secondary school is a dual campus secondary school, and each campus draws from one of five local primary public schools and ten smaller schools scattered through the district. Students may attend one of the ten small village schools for their primary education and then enrol in the secondary school, at either campus, for Year 7. The small schools work together to allow opportunity for students to meet different students and enrich the student learning experience over their time in primary school.

One of the five public primary schools has housed an Opportunity Class since 2008. An Opportunity Class is a selective class offering places to students in Years 5 and 6 with a specific academic program for gifted learners. Students in the class are selected through a formal identification process based on a standardised, purpose-designed test offered state-wide when students are in Year 4 for entry into Year 5. Parents nominate their child to sit the test, on advice from the school, or as an independent decision. All students in the sector are eligible to sit the test. Students from this class move onto the local comprehensive secondary schools and both schools in the study would have received students from the class.

3.3.1 The School Sites

The school sites where participants were identified are both part of a split campus secondary school, located within the city environs. It was originally two distinct secondary schools before becoming a joint campus in 2008. Senior students receive

the greatest benefit from this arrangement as they are able to access a greater range of subject choice and level. For most members of the community, the two schools retain distinct identities, which is consistent with past understandings. They are staffed separately, and operate as independent but interactive locations. When the project commenced, participants in the study were yet to experience the combined aspect of the two campuses. For the purposes of this research the two campuses are considered as separate cases: School A and School B. The principal of each campus was sent an information letter and a consent form approving the school's involvement in the research (Appendix 1).

3.3.1.1 School A

School A was a comprehensive Year 7-12 school located in the central area of the city. It was the original secondary school in the setting, housed in traditional school buildings that had been added to with later additions. The school was highly regarded in the community. The level of experience of the teaching staff varied from graduate to highly accomplished teachers. This was typical of regional schools in New South Wales. Anecdotally, the school was not seen to have major discipline issues and expected reasonable results each year. It was a school that mainly drew from a middle-class community, although there were groups of students from lower socio-economic locations within the student community. Most parents were in full employment, with a lesser percentage unemployed or having one income. The school housed a support unit for students with physical, emotional or severe learning problems and 8% of students were identified as Indigenous.

In 2009, there were 835 students (2009) in the school overall. The number of students in Year 7 was 148 and in Year 10 there were 162. Students are drawn from two main feeder primary schools within the immediate community and also from small schools in the various surrounding villages. The gender ratio in 2009 was 382 girls to 453 boys, with the ratio favouring boys in all years except the 2009 Year 12 cohort. Numbers had been stable in the school over recent years.

In preparation for students entering Year 7 there was consultation between School A staff and the staff in the main feeder schools. Results in the Basic Skills (Year 5) and

standardised spelling using the South Australia Spelling Test (Westwood PS, 1979) were considered, along with teacher comment and observation. Until 2008, all New South Wales students in Years 3 and 5, across all school systems, undertook a Basic Skills—Literacy and Numeracy test. The Basic Skills test was a standardised literacy and numeracy test that provided a benchmark of student achievement in core skills of literacy and numeracy. It was replaced in 2008 by a national testing scheme, the National Assessment Plan—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Students sit this test in August in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The NAPLAN test assesses core skills in literacy and numeracy and measures student achievement across the whole of Australia. Students at the school were grouped into ability-based groups. In 2009 this consisted of the top two groups based on results and then four classes of mixed ability. This had been the approach for a period of time. By Year 10, students' academic records were used to place them in appropriate classes for curriculum subjects. Students were counselled in terms of selecting levels of study and making choices for electives. There was some consultation as students made their choices, with suggestions based on academic ability and previous interest expressed in the area.

The school did not seek to identify its gifted students, or provide specific programming or opportunities for gifted students. Classroom life did not specifically acknowledge or recognise giftedness. Those who excelled academically became known to teachers through in-class assessment and were encouraged to continue to achieve well. No specific focus was given to gifted students and there was not an identified teacher with the role of supporting gifted students. Academic achievement was acknowledged through commendation assemblies twice a year and a principal's commendation given to students "demonstrating outstanding effort, improvement and/or excellence in their reports" (Information booklet for Year 7 and new students, 2009, p. 20). The range of subjects offered in Years 7 and 10 is shown in Table 3.1 on the following page.

Extra-curricular opportunities were available for students in the form of drama productions and musicals, Rock Eisteddfod, art gallery programs, solar car races, sporting cups, debating, mock trial, online learning programs (curriculum-based), peer support, TAFE courses, band and academic competitions in a variety of curriculum

areas, including English, mathematics, chemistry, science and information technology. The school had an established band that performed in many different settings around the community and was identified as high quality. There was no set process for participating in these activities—students could nominate themselves or teachers nominated students they felt would perform well. Where an activity relied on a set of skills, students were required to demonstrate their capacity before joining.

Year 7 included 85 boys and 63 girls. When beginning this research, the students had been in secondary school for six weeks and had settled into the routines of school. Most students had experienced a program of transition that began in Year 6 with visits to the school for science, art and technology subjects. Other ways students were familiar with the school included parent information sessions and visits to primary schools by relevant teachers.

Table 3.1: Range of subject offerings for Years 7-10, School A

Year 7	Year 10
English Mathematics Science History/Geography Integrated Studies Technology Mandatory Dance/Drama Music/Visual Arts PD/Health/PE Sport	English Mathematics Science History Geography PD/Health/PE Elective Line X (choose one): Commerce Physical Activity & Sports- Coaching and First Aid Engineering Technology Food Technology Metal Technology Timber Technology Visual Arts Visual Design Elective Line Y (choose one): Agricultural Technology Dance Drama Food Technology Information Software Technology Japanese Music Textiles Technology Timber Technology Plus: Work experience subject and period of time in employment.

Students were placed in classes according to recommendations from primary schools and standardised test results (Basic Skills/NAPLAN). In mathematics, during first term, students undertook a pre-test to establish levels of understanding but this did not change the group they were in for mathematics for first semester. At the end of the semester, some changes would be made to the groups formed at the beginning of the year. It was on the basis of this testing and the subsequent streamed classes that participants were selected to be involved in the research. All students invited to participate were in the top-streamed class, identified as girls who demonstrated academic talent when entering high school.

Across Year 10 there was an imbalance of achievement between boys and girls, with girls appearing to be performing at a much higher level than the boys across the results of the NAPLAN testing completed in Year 9. Students were able to choose electives from the provided list during Year 9 for Year 10 study. There was not an expectation that students would select subjects that related to their final years of study. Students were graded according to results in earlier years and grouped with those of similar academic levels for key subjects (English, Science and Mathematics). Teachers encouraged students who demonstrated high academic achievement to continue to perform at the same level.

School A was a conservative school with sound educational history and results over a period of years. School B had a slightly different profile.

3.3.1.2 School B

School B was also a comprehensive school within the state system of education, first established in 1975. It was located about eight kilometres from the central area of the regional city, in an area that was once a separate village. In 2005 the original school buildings burned down. The new school buildings were opened in July 2008. For the intervening years the school was housed in a collection of demountable buildings. This means that the students in Year 10 in 2009 had spent their entire secondary school career until July 2008 in diverse buildings and with limited access to resources. In 2009, there were 746 students in the school overall, with 172 in Year 7 and 116 in Year 10. Students were drawn from 20 different feeder schools that included a large

nearby primary school, and a range of smaller schools from surrounding villages. The gender ratio in 2009 was 393 girls to 395 boys. There had been an increase in numbers in the school in the previous two years, perhaps due to the newness of the school, and the concomitant access to a range of high quality resources and facilities, and thus a sense of renewal. The surrounding area had also seen an increase in housing.

Students had access to the full range of curriculum subjects (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Range of subject offerings for Years 7-10, School B

Year 7	Year 10
English	English
Mathematics	Mathematics
Science	Science
PDHPE	PDHPE
History	History
Geography	Geography
Music	Music
Art	Art
Technology	Commerce
Aboriginal Studies	Drama
Information Technology	Circus
	Dance
	Food Technology
	German
	Graphics Technology
	Industrial Technology-
	Electronics/engineering/metal
	/timber
	Information and Software
	Technology
	Japanese
	Textiles technology
	Physical Activity and Sports
	Studies
	Agriculture

In 2009, the school supported gifted and talented students through engagement with programs and competitions external to the school and extracurricular programs in a range of curriculum areas. Students were able to engage with sporting events, circus skills, Tournament of Minds, debating, mock trials, band activities, drama nights and Rock Eisteddfod. Some middle school students participated in a regional online Virtual Opportunity Class that provided a virtual community of gifted students from

across the wider region. Student achievement was recognised and acknowledged by full school assemblies, year assemblies, publication in the school newsletter and a reward system.

Year 7 included 89 boys and 83 girls. When beginning this research, the students had been in secondary school for seven weeks and had settled into the routines of school. Most students had experienced a program of transition that began in Year 6. Other ways students were encouraged to become familiar with the school included Year 6 into Year 7 evenings with parents and students, orientation days and iLearn, a partnership activity between School B and the feeder primary schools. The school streamed students as they entered Year 7, using Basic Skills test results, a short writing task, a numeracy test and advice from primary school teachers.

It was on the basis of this testing and the subsequent streamed classes that participants were selected to be involved in the research. All students invited to participate were in the top-streamed class, which led to an identification of girls who demonstrated academic talent when entering high school.

The Year 10 group of students included 59 boys and 79 girls. These students were grouped by academic ability as demonstrated in earlier test results, teacher information and reports. Students had chosen three electives out of a possible 11 that were available. English and mathematics classes were graded based on Year 9 results. The other subjects were also graded and were offered in two blocks. Support for learning came through support programs, extension work and access to ixtend, a virtual selective school program that operated in the school region. Students continued to take part in a range of extracurricular activities and also experienced a session of work experience during the year. During late Term 3, students in Year 9 and their parents met with Year 10 staff to plan their program of study in Year 11, selecting subjects that would be offered in this school or shared with School A. Students were advised based on their ability, interests and aspirations.

3.4 Participants

Participants were identified as gifted based on their results in the two key markers of academic achievement in New South Wales schools at the time: the English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) and the Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program

(SNAP) results from their earlier school years (see also Vialle et al., 2007) and by school-based anecdotal and testing feedback. They were then divided into two cohorts:

- Cohort 1 included Year 7 girls from School A and School B.
- Cohort 2 included Year 10 girls from School A and School B.

A total of 31 high school participants (Cohorts 1 and 2) volunteered for the research, across the identified years of adolescence, defined by the World Health Organisation as being “the period of life between 15 years to 24 years” (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>). All participants attended an information meeting in their school setting where they were provided with an information sheet and an invitation to join the research (Appendix 2). Parental letters were sent home with students and all parents were invited to contact the researcher if further information was needed (Appendix 3). A time-lapse of a week was allowed between this meeting and the acceptance by participants. At School A the project was described at a Parents & Citizens meeting providing the general parent body with a broad description of the project. Those who accepted the invitation were then informed of the time for the first focus group meeting, which was to be held in their school setting during school hours. Finally, there were to be 18 participants in Year 10: 13 at School A and 6 at School B; and 13 participants in Year 7: 10 at School A and 7 at School B. The mean age of Cohort 1 was 12.67 years and the mean age of Cohort 2 was 15.7 years (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Numbers in the case study groups across school settings

	School A	School B	
Cohort 1: Year 7 Mean age: 12.67 years	7	6	13
Cohort 2: Year 10 Mean age: 15.7 years	12	6	18
			31

Participants in both cohorts were identified by a nominated member of the school staff. In School A the deputy principal took on the role while at School B the gifted

and talented coordinator was the connection. A range of strategies was suggested, including the processes the school currently used to identify gifted students. Suggested identifiers included objective external measures such as NAPLAN results or ELLA/SNAP test results; outside psychometric testing; participation in the Opportunity Class in Year 6; subjective measures including school grades and performance; involvement in provisions for gifted students locally including enrichment programs, mentor or specialist classes, and teacher nomination. It was also suggested that schools considered levels of performance beyond the local school. Identifying gifted students in schools was not a consistent process as each school developed its own approach to identification, including when to identify, what procedures were used and who was responsible. Neither school had a trained gifted and talented coordinator, as suggested in the Policy and Implementation Strategies for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students, (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities, PD/2004/0051/VO3, (https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/curriculum/schools/gats/implementation_1_PD20040051.shtml)).

3.4.1 Cohort 1: Transition from Primary to Secondary School (Year 7)

These participants were in their first year of secondary school, having come from a range of local feeder schools, both within the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (public) school system and the New South Wales Catholic Diocesan system. They had been in the school for six or seven weeks when the initial information meeting occurred. Their friendship groups remained similar to the ones they had experienced in Year 6 although in some cases there was no-one from their previous school in the new setting. They had come from, and continued to be in, mixed gender classes. In a regional centre, school-aged children meet each other in sport, music and community groups and so have formed friendships outside their school peers. However, their closest friends will be those whom they see regularly in the school setting. There were no sets of twins or siblings among those attending the meeting.

The two schools used similar approaches to the organisation of Year 7 classes. At School A, students entering Year 7 came with a profile created by their teachers in

primary school, which included classroom testing and standardised state-wide testing. From these results and other anecdotal school information, classes were formed based on ranking. Students ranked 1, 2 or 3 were placed in the first two Year 7 classes and it was from these classes that students were invited to attend the initial information meeting at the school. Altogether, 20 students were invited to the meeting.

At School B, students were streamed as they entered Year 7, using data from the Basic Skills Tests completed by students in Year 5. Advice from primary school teachers supported the formal test data. The coordinator reviewed information and invited students based on this data and teacher recommendation. There were 15 students invited to the meeting.

Cohort 1 included 13 participants, 7 from School A and 6 from School B.

3.4.2 Cohort 2: Year 10 (mid-school point, completing penultimate stage of schooling)

These participants were in Year 10 at both schools. Identification was made through objective results from the NAPLAN assessments that students participated in while in Year 9. Students who achieved Band 8 in both literacy and numeracy were identified as gifted from these results. Opportunity was also made for other students nominated by school staff in the school setting. This subjective response was measured against NAPLAN results.

At School A, the deputy principal used the software from NAPLAN to search for students in Band 8/9 of the literacy and numeracy results. Achievement at Band 8 level indicated students were in the 80th percentile or above of students across the state in the same year of school. These students were then listed and invited to attend a meeting to receive information about the project. There were 22 students invited to the meeting. At School B, the gifted education coordinator was advised to use similar methods. She was new at the role and not confident at identifying gifted students and asked for confirmation and more information from classroom teachers if needed. At School B, identification was made without my presence, while at School A I was included in the discussion on student selection. There were 15 students invited to the meeting.

Cohort 2 included 18 students, 12 from School A and 6 from School B.

3.5 Instruments of Data Generation

Data were generated from three major sources: a series of focus groups; semi-structured interviews; and personal journals from each participant. The choices of these sources reflected the theoretical approaches to the research but also were deemed appropriate as activities for gifted adolescent girls. Yin (1994) gave clear advice that multiple sources of data would provide opportunity for triangulation of findings, thus enabling the researcher to identify convergences of themes, supporting greater validity. This section of the chapter describes the processes and rationale behind generating data from multiple sources. Table 3.4 summarises this information across both key and minor data sources.

3.5.1 Focus Groups

The main tool of data generation was a series of focus groups over a period of eight months with participants who had been identified as gifted by their schools. During 2009, when the girls engaged with the focus groups, they were in either Year 7 or Year 10, years of schooling that have particular significance in terms of educational progress. In each school setting, two focus groups were formed to represent the two years of schooling (Year 7 and Year 10). Each group met four times in total. For three of these times, participants were engaged in conversation that was instigated and guided by the researcher, though allowed to divert as ideas emerged. The fourth meeting was a short meeting, held between the second and third ‘conversation’ meetings when the participants completed a profile and shared some personal details about themselves. It generated a different level of discussion as participants completed the profile forms.

Focus groups allowed participants to reveal experiences and perspectives that may not be accessible without the group interaction (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The interactions between group members and between the researcher and the members generated conversations that collected insights and opinions that reflected both the

various individuals and the group (Kitzinger, 1994; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Focus groups have not been largely used in feminist research and Wilkinson (1999) found this somewhat of a contradiction due to the tendency of feminist research to be about relational topics and areas, often carried out in settings more akin to the natural settings where women interact as opposed to the more constrained nature of experimental research (Jayaratine & Stewart, 1995; Wilkinson, 1999). Conversing in a group about focus issues brought issues to the forefront of the participants' consciousness and enabled them to both address them and see them in a different light (Montell, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999). The focus groups were then a learning experience as well as an empowering opportunity to construct new views of the world.

In this research, the focus groups were formed from school lists of students, and thus reflected existing social groups without replicating them. While all the girls in all the groups were familiar with each other, they were not necessarily from the same social network outside the research group. The experience of being involved in focus groups could be life changing for participants as they transformed their thinking about themselves and issues, generated ideas in a particular social context, and listened to multiple views and creative responses (Breen, 2006; Darbyshire, Macdougall, & Schiller, 2005; Montell, 1999; Roulston, 2006; Suzuki, Ahliwalia, Kwong, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). When groups were formed from existing networks the commonality of experience privileged members, allowing them to use common language such as colloquialisms, jokes and insider vocabulary, to more freely express their deep thoughts, and generate new ideas as they extended given responses with collective memory and stories (Breen, 2006; Hyde, Howlett, Brady, & Drennan, 2005; Kitzinger, 1995).

Michell (1999) pointed out the need to be conscious of the group impact on the participation of some individuals and suggested that using both focus groups and interviews would be important to explore silenced feelings and opinions. In her project with young girls, participants were consistent in their conversations about life experiences that were largely positive but less consistent between interview and focus group data when issues were sensitive or highly personal. While she recommended focus groups as effective tools for gathering data about experiences she warned of being aware of what is not talked about, highlighting the need for a reflective use of

the material, taking into account the interactions between members, both verbal and non-verbal (Michell, 1999).

It was important to be aware that discussion is not only between the researcher and the participants but also between the participants with the researcher on the periphery. The researcher's role was to guide conversation in a set direction and return the conversation to the focus, but an effective focus group has its own energy and force (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). The breakdown of the 'rigid separation' between researcher and participant may well lead to the emergence of unexpected materials (Kitzinger, 1995; Montell, 1999). By running a number of focus groups at each site within the case study, a relationship was built up between the researcher and the participants, which allowed for the addressing of these issues. There was a development of common language among the groups, as well as some reference points that allowed the questioning to go deeper because the earlier groups had introduced the issues. It provided the opportunity to revisit some ideas and ask again, and to include those who sat on the outer as a feeling of trust developed.

This research focused on adolescents and it is important to examine the appropriateness of the use of focus groups for adolescents. Adolescents generally enjoy the opportunity to tell their own story, share their thinking and articulate their own ideas, talking about their everyday lives with a peer group (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Ho, 2006; Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Tiggemann, Gardiner, & Slater 2003). Despite the possible challenges of expected behaviours in a school setting (Darbyshire et al., 2005), it was predicted that the informality of the focus group setting, with participants and researcher together around a table and a clear explanation of expectations and rules of conversation at the outset, would help to overcome hesitation to speak freely and break classroom expectations for behaviour. Over time, the emerging relationship between participants and researcher afforded a sense of confidence and sharing.

The choice of focus groups can be justified for a number of reasons in this research. My intentions were similar to those described by Ho (2006) in that I planned to find out about the beliefs and perceptions that the participants held about themselves as newly identified gifted individuals and about the images of giftedness and talent in

popular culture. Because focus groups provided an opportunity for social construction of meaning, and deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Breen, 2006), it was appropriate to use them as the key source of data. In this case, the altered power relations between researcher and participants that focus groups generated made the data more valid as it was about the group members bringing their own interpretations to the questions, challenging the views expressed in the questions and speaking their own minds about ideas. This aligned with a feminist perspective as the girls' subjectivities were articulated and shared (Wilkinson, 2006). In a focus group the participants would form an audience for each other and be freed from the constraining roles that the literature suggested were imposed upon them in the classroom (Enders-Draglasser & Sellach, 1997; Grieve, 1994; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Kitzinger, 1994; Mann, 1994). During the groups, the participants frequently used voices, role plays, body language and expression to more clearly express their ideas and emergent feelings.

It was also important to respond to the criticisms made of focus groups and address these in the context of this research. The literature suggested that a focus group may not allow the freedom of speech that is predicted when a group comes together. More dominant or extraverted members may make it difficult for quieter participants to contribute at the same level, and some members may well sit in the group but be silenced by the group (Breen, 2006; Ho, 2006; Litosseliti, 2003; Michell, 1999). The non-verbal indicators that others in the group were agreeing with the speaker included nods, laughter, verbal signifiers and careful reading of the interactions between members in transcripts and reflections allowed for identification of the level of participation by all members (Ho, 2006).

Others have problematised the forced conversation and unnatural grouping of focus groups, indicating concern about the quality of the data then achieved (Kitzinger, 1994). While the focus groups were not entirely natural, the connections that already existed emerged and supported the conversation. There were indicators that the conversation in the focus group mimicked that of natural conversation for adolescents, including sustained conversation between participants without need of researcher intervention, the pace of the conversation as well as the inclusion of laughter, the

finishing of each other's sentences, and evidence of flow as the topic is developed (Ho, 2006; Hyde et al., 2005).

Focus groups were chosen as the key source of data generation because of the perceived benefits they had for this research, namely the construction of ideas in a group that was drawn from existing social networks, in a setting that was familiar where participants had opportunity to generate the direction and content of discussion, as well as specific focus questions and activity that brought topics to their attention. There were also indicators that focus groups were appropriate for studies with a feminist lens because of their more informal environment which enabled girls to express and question their ideas and thinking, with space for individual comment and expression. Focus groups had the capacity to mirror the natural world of adolescent girls. A focus group format allowed the participants, over time, to test ways of being within the group and to consider their role during the conversation. They were able to experiment with different roles and persona, testing these out among peers. The analysis of the group data would need to take into account the content of the conversation, the interactions between participants and the reflective responses of the researcher. The process of analysis will be addressed later in the chapter.

3.5.2 Interviews

The second source of data generation was a series of semi-structured interviews, carried out with volunteer participants from the original focus groups. The interviews happened in the following year (2010), about six to eight months after the final focus group and included questions derived from the analysis of the focus group data. In this way the interviews were able to verify the information generated from the analysis and enabled deeper probing into some of the issues. It was also important to allow opportunity for members of the groups who did not fully participate to have a chance to do so. All original participants were invited to be interviewed and 18 accepted the offer (9 from Year 7: 4 from School A, 5 from School B; and 9 from Year 10: 5 from School A, 5 from School B).

Interviews have been an important tool for data collection in feminist research because of the personal element—the chance to respond to the individual and to

create a natural setting for the interview (Bryman, 2008; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the style of interview allowing flexibility and reciprocal conversation. Reflecting the nature of the research design, the control of power between the researcher and interviewee was not as marked because the researcher allowed the participant to direct some of the responses in the direction the participant chose. In this way, interviews resembled a more social event, looking more like a conversation than an interview as the interaction moved between the researcher and the participant (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1995). The experience could be viewed as a learning process, for by responding to well-designed questions the participants continued to learn about themselves as well as inform the research. Interview data was a tool for triangulation of data from other sources, validating material and engaging participants in an elaboration on their thinking, aiming for deeper examination of some issues (Knightley & Whitelock, 2007).

As suggested by Holland and Ramazanoglu (1995), I knew the topics that were to be covered in the interviews but let the conversation flow in a natural way, utilising a prepared guide (Merton & Kendall, 1946) to reduce repetition or to address pauses in conversation. As interviewer, I was responsive to the participants, showing an interest in their point of view beyond simple quick responses, and looking for rich, detailed answers. The use of open-ended or unstructured questions gave opportunity to respond in individual ways, extending and/or diverting the original question in a way that reflected the importance of the participants' contribution and voice in the research (Bryman, 2008; Merton & Kendall, 1946).

Earlier, the issue of social processes within focus groups was discussed as sometimes problematic. By following up on data generated in the focus groups with a series of interviews there was opportunity offered to participants to add further depth to the original data. All participants were invited to be involved in the interviews, which meant there was opportunity for quieter students to have input in a more private setting or for the dominant members of the groups to talk without a large audience, further developing their responses to the issues in focus. They self-selected a partner for the interview. The data collected in the interviews differed from that collected in the focus groups because it was about the individual's view and allowed for personal

responses and extended comment on issues. The personal relationship between interviewer and participant, different to that created when a group member, allowed participants to feel able to talk about sensitive issues of identity and giftedness. This material was more detailed, and questioning allowed deeper clarification and more intimate responses.

Questions for the interviews in this research were derived from the focus group stories, examining further the ideas and concepts that emerged. Collecting information after a period of time provided information about the impact being involved in the research had had on the girls' view of self and their giftedness, through the lens of individual participants. Responses differed in terms of depth and information from those in the initial focus groups for various members of the groups, and this provided a richer picture of the girls' experiences of popular culture. As well, the interviews were a chance to seek answers to questions that had emerged in the analysis of the data from the focus groups.

3.5.3 Journals

A third source of data that supplemented the data generated from the focus groups and that provided information to be considered in the interviews was a personal journal kept by each participant over the time that the focus groups were running. The journal consisted of blank pages and a log format (Appendix 4).

The literature noted the influence of popular culture on girls and that the diaries of modern girls showed tension, uncertainty and a level of being at risk—giving pictures of social reality that contrasted with their external behaviours and actions (Corti, 1993). As the third source of data, the journals supplemented the data generated in the focus groups, as well as offering opportunity for comparison across both the focus group material and the interview material. It was recognised that there would be challenges as journals may be lost, not completed regularly and include a range of material not expected or requested. The opportunity to collect personal information that focused on the daily inner life of the participants provided a window into their thoughts and experiences which was valuable to ascertain the responses they had away from the group. The keeping of a diary or journal was common social practice

and pervasive in the lives of adolescent girls (Alaszewski, 2006). In their natural, everyday language the writer told their story over a period of time, providing insights into their experiences, thoughts and feelings through expressions of thinking, use of words, evidence of everyday knowledge and unexpected knowledge (Alaszewski, 2006; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Although there may be issues of artificiality and contrivance to meet expectation (Alaszewski, 2006; Corti, 1993), the main purpose of the journals in this research was to allow the participants to explore their thinking about the topics discussed. Other issues related to the use of journals include the quality of the information (Alaszewski, 2006; Corti, 1993; Crosbie 2006). However, in research with a feminist perspective, the description of experience, comments on feelings and opportunity for the participant to have some control over the information being shared, allowed for a more natural, richer expression of life as experienced by girls which is appropriate for the research as designed.

3.5.4 Other Sources of Data

Over the time of research other documentary data was collected arising from questions generated in the initial analyses of the data from the focus groups (see also Table 3.4).

In the first focus group all participants completed a list noting what they would like to do in their lives. Planned to help focus the girls on what they see as their future, this task provided insight into their immediate thoughts about their futures. These were then translated into life lines (Neihart, personal communication, 2008; Sanders & Munford, 2008) to show how the girls saw themselves achieving their goals (Appendix 5). Cross-checking these documents against the conversations held in both focus groups and interviews allowed an insight into what these gifted girls saw in their future.

A short profile giving some details about family and personal preferences in terms of popular culture was also completed in a short third focus group (Appendix 6). The aim of this activity was to build a richer picture of the individuals involved in the

research and show patterns within the participants. At the back of the journals, the log page required girls to complete a log of their engagement with popular culture indicating the type of popular culture engaged with, the length of time spent and any comments about responses (Appendix 4). This enhanced the conversation data and provided insight into some individuals.

Table 3.4: Summary of the data that were collected, reiterating their purpose within this research project and their status as a source of data

Type of data	Purpose of data	Status within this research
Focus group conversations	To explore the feelings and responses of girls to popular culture in terms of themselves, their identities and abilities. Completed as social construction, utilising existing group connections to establish conversations that will be guided by a set of focus questions, but flexible and responsive to the direction taken by participants. Completed as initial process of data generation.	Main source of data.
Timeline documents	To explore the future participants see for themselves, as spontaneous expressions of aspiration and future. Gathered at the end of the first focus group conversation.	Minor source of data.
Personal profiles	To articulate personal, factual information about participants supporting the understanding of them as a group. Gathered in a short focus meeting that addressed only the completion of these profiles.	Minor source of data.
Diaries	To gather personal expressions of thought and experience outside of the group setting. Completed over the time of the focus groups (6 months) in their own time, Possibility of content being shared with the group at each meeting. Free text as well as log pages to offer variety of expressions about popular culture and self.	Minor source of data though more important than timeline and personal profiles.
Interviews: semi-structured and individual	To probe more deeply into data collected and analysed from focus groups, verifying information and clarifying ideas that emerge. Gathered through individual interview approximately 6 months after final focus groups. Participants invited and will volunteer. Open questions will allow for flexibility in content and direction of interview.	Second main source of data.

3.6 Procedure

3.6.1 Ethics Approval

This research was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Wollongong (Ethics No: HE08/288). As students in schools were involved, the research was also approved by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities in February 2008 (SERAP Approval number 2008114).

Following approval, each school principal was approached for permission to work with students from the school. Both principals agreed during February 2009 and appointed a staff member as my main contact. At School A this was the deputy principal and at School B it was the staff member who had taken on the role of gifted and talented coordinator in 2009. Neither of these staff members had specific gifted and talented expertise, but were enthusiastic about the project and able to use a process to identify suitable students.

All students were given a letter of information and an explanatory letter (see Appendix 2) for parental consent. In March 2009 they met as one group (Year 7 and Year 10) in each school for an information session that explained the processes and purposes of the research. At this session they could ask questions and clarify the activity they would be expected to be involved in. Both sessions were supervised by teachers from the school who did not say anything during the session but provided a familiar face. Working with students between 12 and 16 years of age required parental consent. Parents were informed of the processes and purposes of the research by letter after I had met the students during school time (Appendix 3). Parents were provided with a contact number for further information if needed. All school parents at School A were informed of the project through a report at a Parents & Citizens meeting. No parents contacted me during the process of research.

The information sessions went for about 45 minutes and the girls were able to ask any questions, discuss their thoughts about the information and respond to the ideas presented. At the end of the session all girls were given the parental information sheet and the consent pages. Students were asked to return the consent notes to the school

office within one week and a date was set for the first meeting. It was acknowledged that involvement was by choice and withdrawal possible at any time. Students were also aware that while it was good for them to attend each meeting, an absence did not impact their involvement. I had the name of school counsellors for their information if any individual was notably stressed during the research process. There were identified sensitive areas—students were identified as gifted and when announcements were made about our meetings the label was used in both schools. Because we were talking about personal identities and issues of appearance, aspiration and future there was the potential for the discussion to be sensitive and students were pre-warned of this prior to the sessions.

Despite the original intention being that groups would meet on the Charles Sturt University (CSU) campus, all focus group meetings were held in school time on the school premises. This happened for two key reasons: being in a regional area, many of the students travelled by bus to and from school and could not have attended outside of school hours, and getting to a different venue after school posed transport problems. They were definite about the meetings being in school time and both schools agreed that this was acceptable and found spaces that were available to be used consistently over the time of the research. Only on one occasion at both schools did we have to use a different room. The rooms were closed to prevent any conversation being overheard outside the room.

The interviews occurred in June 2010 which was later than originally planned. The delay was due to a perceived need to analyse the focus group data in 2009 before meeting with individuals. By the time interviews could have been held in 2009, Year 10 students had finished school for the year and Year 7 students were busy with end of the year material. Because of the time lapse, all original participants and their parents were contacted through the school liaison and sent an invitation to meet again (Appendix 7 & Appendix 8). Permission had been given for involvement in the interviews in the initial consent form but it was felt necessary to send out a reminder letter. This ensured that the purpose and intents of the research was clarified again. Individual interviews could pose a greater risk as the individual is the focus. The offer of coming in pairs was made. Interviews were held on school premises in school time

as for the original meetings, for the same reasons. This delay also led to the case groups being identified as Year 7/8 or Year 10/11 when referenced in reporting the results.

3.6.2 Procedure

For the first meeting, all students who had completed permission forms attended. Participants were notified through the school morning announcements at both schools and asked to come to the meeting room. At the end of the focus group a time was set with the group for the next meeting. The days/weeks when we met fitted in with the girls' class times—they indicated which classes they were happy to miss and which ones required them to be present. We avoided weeks when there were major school events.

Each group met four times in all—three of these times were longer focus group discussions and the fourth time (between the second and third sessions) was a short meeting to gather specific information about subjects and complete a personal profile sheet. Meetings occurred either at the beginning of the day or over the afternoon session. Those in the afternoon included food—snacks and sweets—as requested by participants. Generally each session ran for 90 minutes and students then returned to their classes, or waited in a supervised location for the end-of-school bell. Interviews were set at a time that best suited the participants.

For each focus group session, students arrived and sat in a circle around a large table. As researcher I sat within the circle. The sessions were recorded on a digital tape recorder and students were aware of the recording. Across all the focus groups, it was only during the initial stages of the meeting that there was any indication from the participants that they were self-conscious of the recording. Seating arrangements were informal but generally remained similar. Table 3.5 shows the times and arrangements of meetings. Themes and ideas that emerged from each cohort formed the basis of planning for the next set of focus groups. A series of open-ended questions was designed to stimulate discussion. These are included in Appendix 10. Participants were encouraged to state their name prior to beginning any comment to assist with interpreting the data. This was not entirely successful and created some discomfort. Rather than insist on it happening, a decision was made to simply let it happen when

it did and not be concerned when it did not. The conversation was then more natural as participants interacted with each other.

Table 3.5: Summary of focus group meetings and attendance

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
Year 7 cohort School A	April <i>9 participants</i>	21 May <i>10 participants</i>	6 July	7 September <i>10 participants</i>
Year 7 cohort School B	4 May <i>7 participants</i>	10 June <i>6 participants</i>	7 July	31 August <i>6 participants</i>
Year 10 cohort School A	26 March <i>13 participants</i>	20 May <i>13 participants</i>	6 July	August <i>10 participants</i>
Year 10 cohort School B	March <i>7 participants</i>	27 May <i>6 participants</i>	7 July	26 August <i>6 participants</i>

3.6.2.1 Focus Group 1

The first focus group served to fully introduce me and the project to the participants, as well as establish a connection between us. Prior to the meeting a plan of questions and possible topics for conversation was developed to guide the interaction and open the discussion (Appendix 11). During the focus group, the interactions developed organically, led by the participants, with a return to the plan if the conversation lost its focus. Spontaneous questions probed the ideas emerging and aimed to clarify the ideas that the girls were articulating. The session lasted for approximately 70 minutes with each group. The opening segment asked each girl to introduce herself and give a little information, then continued with the discussion focusing on defining and talking about popular culture. For the last 15 minutes of the session each group completed a timeline activity that included outlining personal future goals and where they would fit on a lifeline.

3.6.2.2 Focus Group 2

The second focus group occurred between four to six weeks later, depending on school circumstances and opportunities for meeting. A discussion plan was developed from the previous data when, after listening to the conversation again and reading the notes, I established what I thought was the next step, or what was missing in relation

to the big questions I was seeking to answer. Questions to guide this discussion then moved to focus on a specific discussion about giftedness and being identified as clever (Appendix 9).

3.6.2.3 Focus Group 3

At this meeting we talked briefly about factual details about the girls, with a focus on information that had not emerged from the general discussion about their lives, their families and their preferences. This meeting was not recorded. It lasted about 50 minutes for each group. Girls completed the profile, which they handed to me, and talked about some of the ideas that emerged. Notes were taken when I realised that the conversation was in fact different and valuable material for better understanding the girls. See Appendix 6 for the template of the profile page completed by girls.

3.6.2.4 Focus Group 4

The final focus group occurred six months after the first focus group meeting. There was a gap of about four weeks after the previous meeting and the groups were held in the final week of third term in the school year. Year 10 girls at both campuses were in the middle of the process of deciding on subjects for Year 11 and so attendance was reduced as some participants were involved in parent-teacher meetings. Each group went for approximately 60 minutes and focused on the development of characters who would be role models for younger girls as well as the environmental influences on their talent development. See Appendix 9 for question guidelines.

3.6.2.5 The Interviews

At the final focus group meeting, the girls had been told there would be a follow-up interview opportunity, when they could choose to be involved, and where we would meet in smaller groups.

Participants were then invited, eight months later, to attend an interview either alone or in a pair, to further explore the ideas. Arrangements were made through the staff member who had been the liaison during the project. All the girls on the focus group lists were sent an invitation to attend a meeting that would precede the interviews, with both age groups meeting together. At this meeting 24 of the original girls arrived,

and indicated they were volunteering to be interviewed. The original plan was to interview only two or three girls from each age group at each school.

A total of six of the girls decided that they did not want to be interviewed after the meeting. This reduced the final number of volunteers to 18. The girls were asked to indicate a partner with whom they would feel comfortable being interviewed. At School A, there were to be two pairs from Year 7/8 and three pairs from Year 10/11. At School B there were two pairs from Year 7/8 and two pairs from Year 10/11. Times were arranged for the next week. The final schedule of interviews included five Year 7/8 interviews, with three at School A and two at School B, and three Year 10/11 interviews with two at School A and one at School B. In one of the interviews with Year 10/11 at School A, two other participants arrived during the interview and the group agreed to include them. This changed the dynamics of the conversation. At School B, one interview was undertaken with a single girl from the Year 7/8 group, who chose to be interviewed alone. Key to this aspect of data collection was the fact that the girls made choices about with whom they attended the interviews.

Before the interview, the data from the focus groups had been analysed and a summary of key themes was created. This was printed in a document under the four headings of popular culture, aspirations, relationships and rurality (see Appendix 10). To start the interview, the girls were given a copy to read which gave them an overview of the previous conversations from all groups and served to revisit the earlier processes. All participants read it avidly—it was silent during the time and they flicked back and forth through the pages. Each interview group responded to the material positively. They felt clearly that this represented what they remembered of our earlier conversations. The initial questions focused on their agreement that this represented their memories of our conversations. Using the document as a guide to the interview, the process was semi-structured and followed the themes (Appendix 11). The intent was to probe the topics and explore the girls' ideas and any changes in their thinking since we had met previously. The basic premise was to see if they had any more to add about the themes I had identified and to find out what they thought about the plan. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes.

I went into the interviews with some specific ideas I wanted to explore but with the intent as well to respond to the interests the girls showed as they talked. Year 7/8 girls demonstrated a more noticeable change in attitude and confidence than the Year 10/11 girls, resulting in some development of their thinking about the issues that had emerged in the focus group conversations. In keeping with a feminist approach, the relationship and responding to their suggestions was more important than getting through the plan.

3.6.2.6 The Journals

At the first focus group meeting, each participant was provided with a purpose-constructed journal for their use during the project year of 2009 (Appendix 4). It was suggested to the girls that they use their journals to record their ideas about themselves, their connections with popular culture and anything else they wanted to record, in words or visual images. The log pages at the back of the journal enabled them to record details of their engagement with popular culture in any mode. The girls were invited to bring their journals with them when they attended each focus group meeting, and the intention was that the group would share and reflect on some of the content.

Across the groups, some girls brought their journal to the next meeting, but others did not. One girl in Year 7/8 at School A required a new journal at the next focus group because she had filled her initial journal pages with drawings and illustrations. While the pages provided a stimulus for discussion, the girls overall were not engaged with sharing the content. At each meeting they were reminded to continue to fill in their ideas and thoughts, and after the fourth focus group the girls were asked, verbally and through a letter, to return their journals to the school office (Appendix 12). For each journal returned at School A, a canteen voucher was given to the participant. At School B, each girl who returned a journal was given a small gift as their canteen did not offer vouchers. Only five of the Year 10/11 age group returned a journal. Of the 31 journals given out, a total of 19 were returned.

3.7 Analysing the Data

A process of triangulation was undertaken beginning with the evidence generated from the focus group transcripts, aligning the concepts and ideas evident in each

source of data to corroborate the findings across the multiple sources of data generated as suggested by Bryman (2008) and Yin (1994) (see Figure 3.3). The data generated through focus groups, interviews, journals and documents were analysed with a strategy of constructivist grounded theory.

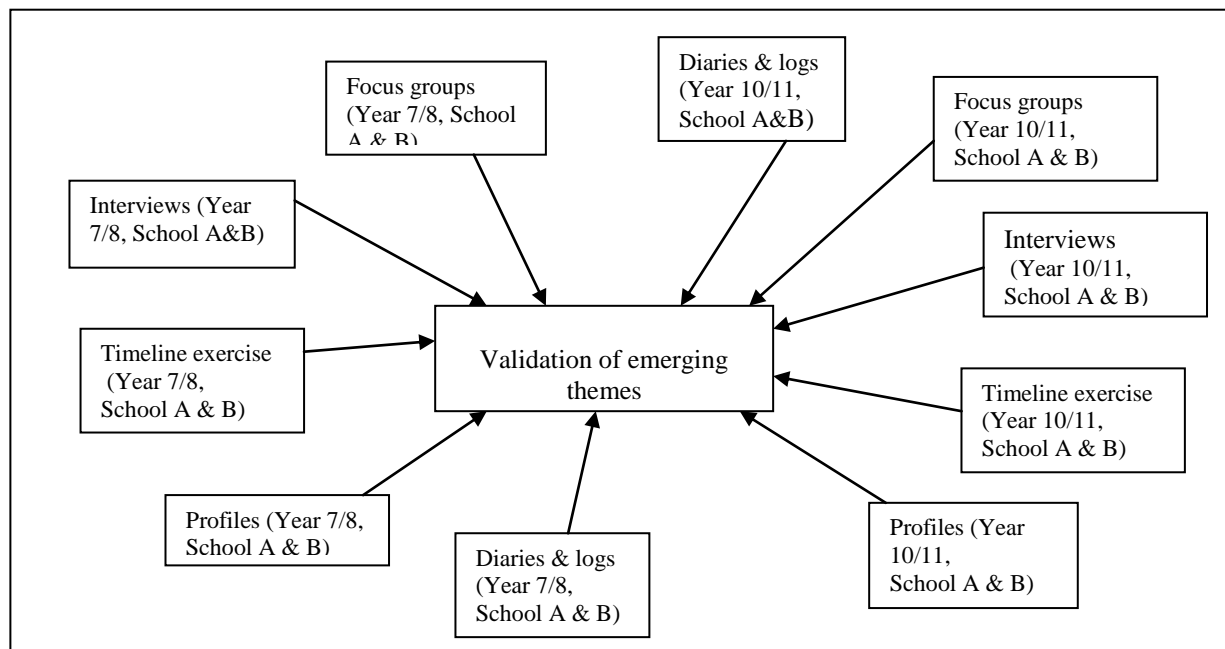


Figure 3.3: The Process of Triangulation

Constructivist grounded theory evolved from the original concept of grounded theory espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Charmaz (2006) suggested that it was not only the themes and ideas that emerged from the initial examination of data that were important, but also the interactions within the data between researcher and participant and those between the researcher and the data as analysis occurred that produced the theory. Although Bryant (2007) identified the need for the researcher to be an objective outsider to the data, the feminist approach to the research encouraged multiple perspectives with corresponding multiple truths and this impacted on the role played as researcher. My impact on the gathering of data must be acknowledged and allowed to be part of the story (Charmaz, 2006). A constructivist approach to analysis was an appropriate method of data analysis for this research because it relied on multiple perspectives and honoured the different truths that emerged from any data generated, seeking to establish the reasons behind what the participants said and thought, including the ‘why’ of their responses to the world around them (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006b). I acknowledged the issues of

objectivity while being deeply involved in the reconstruction of the story as the data were deconstructed, meanings within it defined and the import of my interaction both on, and with, the content was recognised (Jones & Hill, 2003; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006a).

A core story was sought in the data, a central narrative idea that encapsulated the feelings and words of the participants and could be identified as a recurring narrative throughout the data. Such a process resulted in a reconstruction of the experiences and meanings expressed in the data, as I included my perspectives as well as the stories told by the participants, and the stories of the interactions and relationships during the data gathering experience (Charmaz, 2006; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006a). A literary approach to the write-up of the analysis then used descriptive elements that highlighted the emotions of participants, details of the setting and my reflections on the process, including how participants responded to the material and how I responded to the participants (Charmaz, 2006). The context of the data generation, including the time, place, setting and situation, was an essential component of the analysis, linking to create the knowledge that is expressed in the story. Ghezeljeh and Emami (2009) outlined the process of analysis as being one where the data is reconstructed in text, with notes about the social interactions that occurred and reflections on how the participants explained their ideas to the group, and how the researcher engaged with the participants and their ideas. As the data were read and re-read, questions were asked of it, focusing not only on its content but also by myself *to myself* about the experience of being part of the conversation. It was this personal interrogation as I worked through the analysis that enabled construction of the full story that the data allowed access to.

Table 3.6 summarises the approach to data analysis, identifying the questions to be asked, and the tasks I planned to make meaning of the information I had.

Table 3.6: Summary of data analysis approach

	Focus point of analysis	Tasks to be done	Process of analysis
Step 1	What are the responses to these concepts from the key research	Using transcripts from first focus group, keeping Year 7 and Year 10, extrapolate excerpts that mention key words from key research	Analyse these for stories that are evident in the conversation content.

	question, sub questions 1 & 2?	question: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular culture • Giftedness • Aspiration 	
Step 2	Within the topics and ideas what deeper ideas are mentioned?	Take each set of conversation fragments and look for common ideas and themes.	Break down into a series of smaller 'stories'.
Step 3	Are the same responses built on in the next focus groups?	Repeat process with transcripts from focus group 2.	Analyse stories evident in previous group conversation. Note any new ones that are brought into the discussion.
Step 4	Are the same responses evident in the final focus group?	Again, read content and find stories and ideas that are evident in the conversation.	Compare with earlier ideas. Construct stories from this group, adding new ones that are evident.
Step 5	What are the stories that are evident in the content? How do the stories answer the question at this level of analysis?	Bring together the conversations based on the topics. Construct as a story at each year level.	Compare the two stories (Year 7 and Year 10). Conceptualise differences (sub question 3). Record a response to the question.
Step 6	What ideas are expressed in the journals?	Repeat Steps 1 and 2 with the journals. Also return to transcripts and examine the conversations had with the journals on show.	What can be written about this picture of the girls?
Step 7	What does the other data say about these ideas?	Examine all other pieces of data I have, e.g., the profiles, the timelines and life goals task.	Compare these ideas with other sources. Add to the detail.
Step 8	What do individuals add to the material? Issue open initiation to all participants who want to contribute at this level.	Analyse interview transcripts using Step 1, 2, 6, 7. Interview questions will emerge from the analysis of the focus groups and will aim to dig deeper or check if this is what individuals see.	Edit story in response to what is found in interview data.
Step 9	What is the final story of this research?	Draw together to tell the story of girls talking about popular culture, giftedness and achievement. This will be the result of my collection and then I will discuss how their stories match or mismatch the literature.	

All focus group conversations were recorded on a digital recorder, and at each meeting the girls were reminded and it was confirmed that this would be so. I kept notes on each session, including a diagram of where each girl sat around the table and

observations of body language, non-verbal responses and interactions between the participants. These notes also included my own reflections on each session, further thoughts I had, and ideas for the next session. Recorded focus group conversations were transcribed for analysis. Individual participants were not identified in the transcription, although there were instances when this could happen. By listening to the recording, individuals could be identified if needed, however this was not deemed essential as I analysed the transcripts because I was interested in the overall stories and not individual contributions.

Using Leximancer to analyse language patterns in the data, I identified key focus points in the language used. From this early analysis I noted that there were patterns in the conversations that centred on giftedness, aspiration and popular culture. I did not continue with Leximancer although this initial analysis provided a starting point for analysing the full transcripts from the focus groups. The patterns suggested the recurring themes in the topics of conversation. I initially used hard copies of the data, and highlighted the themes in different colours before they were cut and pasted to be collated in separate documents, named as follows: gifted girls talking about popular culture; gifted girls talking about giftedness; gifted girls talking about aspiration and achievement; and gifted girls talking about rurality. A separate document was made for Year 7/8 and Year 10/11, and excerpts were labelled according to school and focus group. These documents were then re-read a number of times, seeking to identify consistent story lines. I re-arranged the excerpts to connect them when the story lines seemed to link. After a number of re-readings, I wrote the first stories, drawing the narrative together as a coherent text. I constructed a summary under the headings of popular culture, giftedness, aspiration and rurality. This summary was the document shared with the participants in the interviews (Appendix 10).

Data from the interview recordings were also transcribed and in the same way, highlighted for the original themes and collated across the case groups. Through a process of triangulation, the convergence of the stories that emerged from the interview data with those from the focus group stories validated the original analysis and added depth to the narrative. Further triangulation occurred when the journals were read and dissected in the same way, providing further validation and detail.

Finally, the log entries were examined separately, with the comments made by the girls further supporting the other data. The stories were then woven into the discussion of the overall results, using the stories to respond to the research questions.

The process of analysis sought to identify when the values and beliefs of the participants were evidenced in their conversations and the processes that occurred between them as they talked (Bryant, 2007). The notes recorded during the focus groups served to highlight the processes and responses I had as researcher to the experience and how this may have impacted on subsequent interactions. Bryant (2007) also suggested that it was the construction of these stories, as analysis is happening, that brought out the theory.

3.8 Summary of Method

This chapter has outlined the design of the research, the tools used to generate data and the processes that were undertaken to implement the research project. It has provided a description of the reasoning that informed the choices of data generation and included details of how these choices were put into action. Processes of analysis and the construction of the narrative of the findings have been outlined.

The data will be reported on by age group in Chapters 4 and 5 to highlight and bring to the attention of the reader the voices of the girls themselves as key to the research. Recognising that, as feminist research, there is a sense of emergence in the data (Yegedis & Weinbach, 2006), it was important to show this in the presentation of the results.

Chapter 4: Results Year 7/8 Case Study

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will report on the findings that emerged from the first case study, the Year 7/8 group of participants. It will build a narrative description of this group of girls, their responses to popular culture, to being gifted, and to the connections that they see between popular culture and their development as talented individuals. Figure 4.1 on the following page presents the organisation of the chapter material.

Data were gathered from focus group conversations and activities, interviews and the journal content provided by the girls. Each data set was considered independently and triangulated by considering key words and phrases that introduced similar topics.

4.2 Year 7/8 Girls: A Case Study

4.2.1 Profiles

Seventeen girls in Year 7, with a mean age of 12.67 years (July 2009) participated in the focus groups from March to November in the first year of the study. In Year 8, nine of the girls accepted the invitation to participate in the interviews, four from School A and five from School B, in four pairs and one individual interview. All these girls form the Year 7/8 case group. In July 2009, 70% of the girls (12/17) completed a profile form (Appendix 6) that provided information about their family, preferences and interests. Appendix 13 (Table 1) provides a full summary of the profiles. Most of the girls came from nuclear families, and most were the youngest in the family. Only two of them were in a form of paid employment, although this reflected the legal age of employment in New South Wales. Outside of school, art was one of the most frequent activities of the girls, followed by church activity, instruments and dance. While five of them did not play sport, the rest of the group played at least one form of sport regularly. In terms of relationships, family was the top priority for 75% of the girls who responded to the profile, and 75% also indicated that friends were their second priority. Across other aspects including pets, appearance, health, boyfriends and job, responses were scattered with no clear pattern.

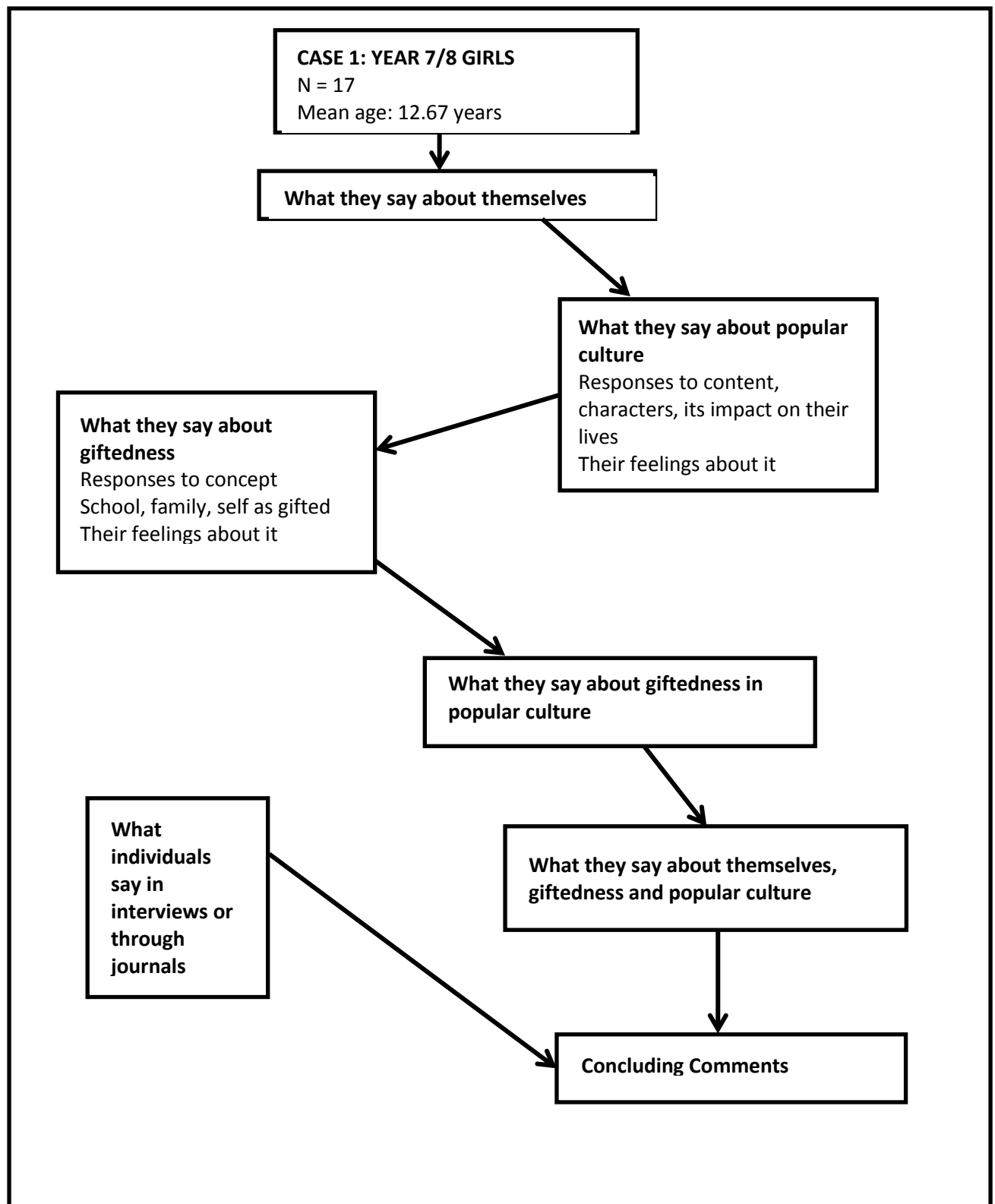


Figure 4.1: Outline of Chapter 4

Overall these girls considered themselves happy, with 91% of the girls indicating this, and similarly, 91% considered themselves different from their peers, although the difference was not defined. However, only 83% of the girls identified that they considered themselves successful, and 66% considered themselves bored. A further 66% identified that they were healthy. Full details of the responses can be found in Appendix 13 (Table 2).

4.2.2 Identity

The girls in each school were not all in the same social group but were happy talking together in the focus group meetings. During the interviews, I was able to gather more specific data about the individual girls, and to specifically ask them questions about themselves and their understandings of the key conceptual themes that had emerged from the focus group discussions. These included identity, aspirations and rurality. They made the following comments about the concept of identity, and their own identities:

P1: Basically just who you are as a person I guess.

P1: ... your beliefs and your disbeliefs and who you want to be and that kind of stuff.

P2: ... don't fully know who I am ... as you sort of get older you ... get more content with who you are I guess.

R: ... why do you feel good about yourself at the moment?

P1: ... it's probably because like our friendship group's ... really grown ... we've got ... all these guys in our friendship group now too ... all these extra people like smiling at you and that kind of stuff makes you feel better.

Interview, R&E, School A, Year 7/8

R: So you feel like you've grown up in the last 8 months?

P2: ... I'm doing more... less childish things and I've got out and gotten a job.

Interview M&S, School A, Year 7/8

P: [laugh] I don't think it really changes who you think you are because ... you're not any different than how you were just because you have a label really.

Interview, R&E, School A, Year 7/8

R: ... when you look at your parents and the way they do things and they believe in things, are you different to that or are you the same?

P1: A bit of half, half.

P1: The way they look at some things I don't agree with, but others I do.

R: Do you question it?

P1: ... not really.

P1: the way my parents see stuff, like they don't get what's happening ... at school and stuff. And they try and help, but sometimes they make it worse...

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P2: ... girls can do stuff on their own: they don't have a male around.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

The girls saw themselves as independent, but connected to friends and families, confident and employable and self-reliant. They were developing their sense of who they would be when they grew up. The girls had reached a time when they were thinking about who they were, in relation to their families, their friends and their sense of self. These girls appeared to be comfortable with their current identity, although they were aware that they may find themselves changing in the future, noting that they were confident to be independent, to make decisions and to accept labels from others without losing a sense of themselves.

4.2.3 Aspirations

In an exercise in the first focus group meeting, the girls were asked to identify their goals and aspirations, and then create a timeline of their lives, showing what had been significant in their history, and where they saw themselves in future years. Table 4.1 shows their predicted future timelines as indicated in this exercise. Table 4.2 summarises their aspirations as recorded in the profiles.

Table 4.1: When will I achieve my goals?

Participant	Before turning 20	20-30	30-40	40+ years of age
A		Architect	Artist	
B	Have a car Finish school	Become a dance teacher		
C	Finish Year 12 Own a property	Go to university Marry Have children		
D	Learn to drive			
E	Take metal work class	Travel Marry	Detective or member of band	
F	Athlete	Actor		Artist
G	Drive and own car	House Job Athlete		
H	Hockey champion Overseas Go to university	Play for Australia Meet someone famous		
I	Finish school Go to uni Travel to LA	Hawaii		
J		Tasmania Travel around Australia Swim with dolphins		
K	Chef Meet famous people		University—BA	
L	Go to France	Become a Matilda player		
M	Finish school Move out of home	Marry Honeymoon in Italy, France, overseas Play for Australia	Family reunion	
N	Join circus Work with animals	Ride dolphins Go to different country		
O	Finish school Designer Professional dancer	Famous painter Pro-soccer player		

Table 4.2: Aspirations of Year 7/8 girls

Careers	Travel	Meeting Famous People	Sport	Family	Other
Detective Designer Work with animals Pro-chef (2) Painter Pro-dancer Veterinarian (3) Work in zoo Singer Member of band Doctor Actor RSPCA Nurse Photographer Artist (3) Dance teacher Architect Athlete (2)	Around the world England Japan (2) Uluru Great Barrier Reef A different country Italy France (2) Los Angeles Tasmania (2) Across Australia Giza—the Pyramids Fiji Hawaii (2) Hollywood Overseas	Miley Cyrus (2) Pink (2) Taylor Launter Jonas Brothers Jesse McCartney Zac Effron Someone	Matilda Soccer player Pro-soccer player Netball for Australia Netball Premiere Jockey League	Family reunion Live on property (2) Have children Get married (2)	Involved with horses Own my own car Complete a metal work class Go to university (3) Ride a dolphin Swim with dolphins Join the circus Finish school Skydive with friends (2) Stop world poverty and slavery

When aspirations came up in conversation in the focus groups, the girls also noted some of the following ideas:

P: I want to go to like Africa or Asia or somewhere ... I saw the thing about the, on TV about the Humane Society where they were saving the Orangutans ... I'd love to be doing something like that and travelling the world.

P: ... I'd like to travel but I don't know what I'd do ... Probably making more things, doing more creative things.

Interview, R&E, School A, Year 7/8

P2: I want to be a chef.

I: And why do you want to be a chef?

P2: 'Cause my mum is and I just love cooking. I just like it, it's so much fun.

Interview M&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: I wanted to be an assistant vet as well if I don't make it with soccer ... I wanted to finish Year 12 and not go to uni. I don't need to go to TAFE or uni. I want to get a good job ... a part-time job and save up enough money to visit one country.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P: ... a lot of people like try and think about how much money you're going to get from that kind of stuff because ... I really want to be ... a zoo keeper ... But then I've had a lot of people say to me '... you're not going to have enough money to support a family' ... well it's what I want to do ...

R: ... some people are driven by money, some people are driven by self-satisfaction.

P: ... even though sitting behind a desk all day would pay more ... you wouldn't do anything with your life really.

R: How do you ... get that understanding of that ... where have you learnt about that?

P: Probably from movies really and TV ... [laugh].

Interview E&R, School B, Year 7/8

P2: I like dancing, but I don't think I do, I'd be able to do dancing professionally.

R: Why not?

P2: I don't actually go to a dancing school: I just do dancing at, at school ...

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: I was going to go over to Africa and work over there with the poor and ... poverty ... because I really wanted to do that.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: I have dreams [laughs] ... I don't think I will make it at the soccer, but I don't know.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

In conversation, the girls had dreams and visions for themselves undertaking further learning and clear career paths. The fact that career education had, for one girl, come through a television show is an interesting comment on the import of popular culture in informing thinking. When comparing these spontaneous comments in the interviews with the individual reflective task the girls completed, a consistency of aspiration is clear. The reflective tasks gave greater detail and highlighted that all the girls, in Year 7/8, had already given some thought to their futures and were able to define some of the aims they had at this time. Travel was a common aspiration, within Australia and to popular destinations shown on, or linked to, popular culture such as Hollywood and Los Angeles. Having at least one career was also clearly an aspiration for the girls. Choices included careers often shown on popular culture such as sports, dance, acting, designing and arts. Some girls suggested that they would have an initial

creative career followed by a more serious career, for example, as a veterinarian or a doctor and others suggested that the serious career would come first. Only one girl aspired to change the world by working against poverty and slavery, and only two girls indicated they would marry and one, have children. Owning a car was mentioned by four of the girls.

Fourteen of the girls in this study had not been formally identified as gifted during their earlier school years. Three of the Year 7/8 group had been members of an Opportunity Class during their final year in a local primary school, and so had been acknowledged as gifted within the school system. The others had progressed through their school career with varied levels of success and with no labels to identify their potential ability across the school years. However, they mentioned their abilities a number of times in relation to who they saw themselves as:

P1: I love English: I love writing stories and stuff. I find it easy to just make up a story on the spot. That's another thing if, if I don't make it as I plan, be an assistant vet or a vet, and then in my spare time I'd write books.

R: Are you clever?

P2: I'm not really good at Maths, but English ... Japanese because it's good doing a different language.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: I thought something had gone wrong, that I'd been picked.

P1: ...I didn't think I was clever.

P1: I kind of thought I was clever in everything but maths...

P1: ...Tech, it kind of is a breeze, and music ...

P1: I like geography and English and history: I really like history, because of, I think it'd be interesting learning about old things.

R: But would you have given yourself the label of 'gifted' before?

P1: No [laughs].

R: Having that label now, does that make you see things differently?

P1: ... a little bit.

P2: Yeah.

R: How?

P1: That it's not a bad thing to be gifted, and that you don't really get teased if you're gifted... [laughs].

P2: It hasn't really made a difference in school or anything, because people who were mean to me are still mean to me.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

Different girls saw the concept of being identified as gifted in different ways, and also recognised that they had had some sense of their level of ability through their responses to curriculum subjects at school. Being given such an identity had not made a social difference to either L or S, as things seemed to have remained the same for them outside the research group. Later in the interview it was made clear, though, that an impact of the research was that the girls looked at themselves differently, as indicated in the next two excerpts:

P2: ... I didn't really think I was the gifted one.

P1: That made me see myself differently.

P2: My brother was more the gifted one in our family...

P2: I can actually do stuff as well as him, but he just does the things that the University of Sydney ...

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: It made me think that, 'Yes, I can be intelligent and do well at some of these things that I didn't think I was smart at'.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

P2 had realised that, while her brother had always been the one identified as gifted, she had her own giftedness. Her voice in this exchange was quite surprised, and her behaviour indicated some excitement at the prospect. For P1 the identification opened a number of possibilities for her to follow up.

4.2.4 Rurality

An important aspect of the girls' lives is their rurality. These girls live in a regional city in New South Wales, west of the Great Dividing Range, and approximately 350 km from the major metropolitan area. For the most part, they have always lived in this location, and experienced all their schooling to this point in regional public schools. While the question had been asked in the focus group discussions about their feelings about living in rural New South Wales, there had not been clear evidence of their ideas about its impact. During the interviews these questions were specifically asked and the girls expressed the following ideas about life in a rural setting:

P1: You don't just have all the time to just go into town every day.

Interview, M&S, School A, Year 7/8

P1: ... as you get older it's ... harder to get a good career if you're intelligent in ... a small country town ... because there's nothing there and there's no unis and it's even kind of hard here because I wanted to do architecture for a while and then they didn't have the course ...

P1: So I would've had to gone to S or somewhere like that, so I guess it, just means you get affected as you get older.

Interview E&R, School B, Year 7/8

P1: ... the difference is that the one (here) is really good, the university. But it doesn't have as many courses ... as the ones [in] Sydney because they're bigger and because they have more of a population up there: they have more people that will do those courses.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

R: ... rurality ... do you think that makes a difference to you as people?

P2: I don't think so.

P2: ... when I moved back out here, nothing really changed. It's the same sort of people. There are just different schools and they just act differently.

R: How do you visualise Sydney life? Is it a good place? Is it an exciting place to go ...?

P2: ... parts of it are OK, the upper parts around the Cross are a bit scary...

R: Do you see yourself going there eventually, because that's where you've got to learn the stuff that you need to know?

P2: I wouldn't actually live there ... I like it here. It's more community lifestyle.

P1: I don't really want to live there, because there's so many people there and it's so crowded in, everything is large, sort of smaller towns all joined together.

R: Do you think, as gifted people, you will have to leave here to get to do what you want to do?

P1: Probably.

Interview, M&S, School A, Year 7/8

R: ... we live in a rural area. Do you think that makes a difference to you as girls now?

P1: Yes, 'cause girls our age I know in Sydney ... they're into shopping and boys, and they're more open to everything that's happening, appearance and ... models and stuff.

R: Do you think it's harder to be an intelligent person in the country?

P2: No.

R: ... you are intelligent girls: does that change how you see and where you live?

P1: I don't think it does, because we have the same kind of education and that, opportunities out here and I don't think it does.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

R: What do you like about being a girl from the country?

P: That you get to do, you have all of the stuff that ... most of the stuff that the city has, but you have ... more open space ... and you have more area instead of just little scary parks everywhere.

Interview C, School B. Year 7/8

P1: I wanted to visit a different country and see what it's like, because I've kind of been sheltered: I haven't really been anywhere except for Queensland and Canberra.

Interview, L&S, School A, Year 7/8

R: Are you different to city girls?

P: Well, lately because my brother's been to Sydney a few times and we got to see how everybody else is compared to up here ... you could barely breathe and stuff down there.

R: It's a difficult environment isn't it?

P: ... you could just see that they're ... all cool and ... you didn't see that many people like you do up there. They're just normal people up here and everyone down there always makes each other different.

Interview C, School B. Year 7/8

Living in a rural area was preferred by these Year 7/8 girls, even though they recognised that they would probably have to leave the area to get the education they needed for most careers. At this stage, they preferred the open spaces and the relative safety of their regional community. They noted that it was easier to know people and to be known, and that girls from the city appear to be more sophisticated and more interested in relationships with boys and different life activities. The cityscape appeared to scare them and while they enjoyed the shopping and variety, the main purpose for moving to the city for them would be for further education. Overall, living in a rural area was not perceived to be a disadvantage by these girls at this point in their lives.

4.3 Popular Culture

4.3.1 Defining Popular Culture

When asked for a definition of popular culture, the girls made a number of suggestions, shown in the series of comments below:

P1: You can find it all over the world ... everywhere ... in Africa ... everywhere...

P2: In Japan.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P: Music and other people's cultures and readings ... The things other people do.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P: CDs and magazines and stuff.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P: Something that we are interested in and that we want to do.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P: Stuff that's important to Australia and teenagers are interested in ... music and the computer and technology.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P3: It's Japanese comics ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

In the journal log entries, the girls were asked to identify the type of popular culture they interacted with, and their choice of entries defined popular culture in different ways again, extending the earlier discussion and providing more individual ideas, as shown in the following excerpts from the journal log pages:

Soccer ... shopping (Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7A)

Dancing ... DS machine ... soccer ... disco and sleepover ... scrapbooking ... birthday
(Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7F)

iPod ... Bebo (Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7D)

Netball ... Pink concert ... Nintendo DS (Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7E)

Youth group (Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C)

Playstation ... PC ... camera ... hair straightener ... laptop ... comic book ... book ...
drawing paper ... guitar (Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7A)

Radio ... sports carnival ... went into town (Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7B)

Eragon series ... soccer training ... piano lessons (Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7D)

Popular culture was described as objects that the girls use or own, and also as activities in which the girls participate. It was defined as closely connected to their daily lives, and reflecting their interests and concerns. While connection to online environments and social media was included, the list included a broader group of items and events. The simple responses—*music, CDs and magazines and stuff*—demonstrated that the girls placed popular culture in the entertainment sphere,

although the juxtapositioning of *music and other people's culture...* with *the things other people do* represented the confusion that existed in the way the Year 7/8 girls defined the concept. Initial comments (*all over the world*) indicated that the girls immediately thought that the term 'culture' referred to patterns of behaviour and social mores.

There was an awareness that popular culture was constructed and reflected its origins in the following comments made later in the conversation:

P5: We have our sort of ways of drawing comics in Australia and it's just their way of drawing comics in there and they just look ...

P2: And look like their culture and people, coz Australia's comics look like us.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P1: And they draw people with really huge eyes coz they think people that aren't Japanese have big eyes.

R: Do you think they're drawing what to them is an ideal way to look or just a different way to look?

P2: How they think other people look with bigger eyes and stuff.

P3: And big heads.

P5: It's ... what they think of other people ... we think [that] Chinese people ... are all the same with all black hair and if they had two people from the same family you wouldn't know which one ... they think the same as us ... that our hair colour is all the same and that's just their way of identifying us.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The connection with Japan as a source of popular culture was evident when P3 defined popular culture as *Japanese comics*. These girls talked about Manga artwork and recreated many of the characters in their journals. The images were stereotyped and appeared to be reproductions of the artwork, rather than original images. While the participants were not necessarily cognisant of the insights they were making about the construction of popular culture and its contextual comments when they mentioned *look like their culture and people, coz Australia's comics look like us* and *it's just like what they think of other people*, it was clear that the girls had made some intuitive connections.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to respond to the comment that defining popular culture was a challenge for their group. They accepted the summary that

highlighted that they were not sure of a definition and that the people featured in popular culture were a focus of their interest.

4.3.2 The Content of Popular Culture

It was clear that the girls responded to the content they experienced in popular culture, especially in terms of television shows and movie plots, and articles and images in magazines. When they talked about popular culture content, the Year 7/8 group focused primarily on the content of television and visual media. There was familiarity with the details of plots and characters, and this created a common language among them. In the group from School A, there were two girls who had not always had a television in their household. One of these girls noted that while she had not missed the access to television, the fact that others were talking about the content sometimes made her feel less engaged in conversation.

P: I didn't think I'd missed out ... when they were talking about ads and stuff on TV,
I was like, 'What?'

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

Her concern was not so much about lack of access, but more about the fact that she could not follow the conversations or feel part of the discussions because the difference she noticed when the family home had a television was that she was *more aware of what they're talking about, when they have conversations about TV* (Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S).

Some of the girls included their reading material in their record of interactions with popular culture in their logs. Briefly, two of the journal logs described these responses to books:

25/5/2009: Reading Stockman series ... a whole hour ... good book ... I love this book series! It relates back to me a lot and my life, that's probably why I like them.

27/5/2009: Reading Stockman ... it got quite intense ... a good sort of intense. I left it in suspense because I kept getting interrupted. The book makes me feel calm also lucky.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7F

7/9/2009 Eragon series ... I read by myself at home and on the way to and from school ... my thoughts are that the Eragon series are well written books that make you not want to stop reading.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7D

In the focus group discussions, there was no mention of these ideas. Popular culture content from visual media did appear to form the basis of many of their conversations. Considerable time in the focus groups was spent recounting the plots of movies or television shows, despite some comments that they did not watch very much television: *but I don't really watch much TV* (Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S).

While talking about the content, the girls shared sentences, talked about characters as real people, and expressed in detail the way a story developed. They shared feelings and ideas about the shows and responded to the characters in comparison to themselves. The following is an example of the type of storytelling that recounted the plot of a television show:

- P1: I was watching this movie ... there was this girl ... she wore all the stuff that suited her and ... that she liked and actually looked good on her and some of the other girls ... they dressed all like everyone else did ... they didn't think she looked right so they took her to a store and ... the lady in the store actually saw they suited her and that she needed the makeup and ... different outfits ... I was watching this other movie and a lady and she bought a pair of really cool boots and they really suited her but were really uncomfortable.
- P2: It's really funny and she was walking and they really cost a lot ... so she didn't want to take them off ... they really looked good ... she was walking down the street and ... she had to take them off ... her feet were all bleeding ... then she walked past the store and ... saw another pair of boots ... a different colour and she went, 'ohh, I really want them' and her husband said no ... but she still really wanted to wear them coz they looked good.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The length and highly descriptive nature of the individual comments highlighted how closely the plot lines had been followed and remembered. There was a sense of storytelling and while talking all participants were highly engaged with the retelling, demonstrating this with nodding and laughing. The content of popular culture found on television or in movies fed the conversations of the girls, whether they were critical or not. It was surprising to listen to them recount in depth the details of story lines, and to note that the retelling of these story lines formed such a quantity of the conversations they had in this age group.

There was some disenchantment with the way that popular culture depicted real life, summed up succinctly during the interviews by S and M:

- P1: I used to feel like every movie, every song was about girl meets boy, fall in love, they get married, the end.

P2: They always get together, in the end of the movie in some totally ridiculous way. It's just like, there's nothing else in the world. Even if it's one of the little kids' movies, it's still fall in love.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M

4.3.3 Soap Operas

These comments gave an indication of the critical thinking that the Year 7/8 girls undertook around the content of popular culture. This criticism of television and its transmitted messages was most evident when the girls talked about soap operas. Most of the girls watched one or both of the dominant soap operas shown on television in the evenings at this time in New South Wales. This is evident in the following short excerpt:

R: Do you watch 'Home and Away' or 'Neighbours'?

Ps: Yeah, yeah [general noise].

P1: I have watched it ...coz everyone likes it.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The second statement, *yeah, yeah* was made in unison by all the girls in this group, and accompanied by non-verbal indicators of agreement. Every girl had knowledge of the two key soap operas ('Home and Away' and 'Neighbours'). They recognised that these soap operas exaggerated real life and provided examples that were not always the ideal life, as these excerpts show:

P1: It doesn't seem like real life.

P3: The closest soap I have ever seen would be 'Neighbours'—that would be the closest I would see to real life.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P2: 'Home and Away' is so old, they just keep doing the same thing: 'Oh no, she's pregnant. Oh, it's not my baby'. It's just the same, it's just so stupid.

P3: Every time I see the ad it's ... 'Will he leave her? Oh no, who is this mystery man?' [did dramatic action of what people say].

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

I watched 'Neighbours' ... some of the things that they do is [sic] just ridiculous.

Journal log entry, Year 7/8, School B, B7A

I hate how in Neighbours and stuff the girls are such drama queens.

They go on and on and on about the most boring stuff. They need to get over themselves ... they need a reality check majorly!

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

Here the cynicism about these shows is evident in P3's dramatic reiteration of the style of conversation presented in the scripts of the shows, and the 'drama queen' reference in the journal comment. As well, P2's comment highlighted that, while everyone watched these soap operas, there was awareness of the disjoint between the shows and the real world. The girls clearly saw soap operas as constructions that presented a certain view of the world and they spoke about the dramas as being *boring, dragged out, weird* as exhibited in the following excerpts:

P1: It's getting a bit weird now ... all these people are having these dramas and they just continue it, and there's no ending to it ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P3: Make something so small end up so big and they just drag it on ... they don't stop.

P2: And they go on and on.

P3: They go on and on ... how Jack died and then it gets so boring ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

Some ideas presented were unrealistic and over the top ... also they teach young children to behave like that ...

Journal log entry, Year 7/8, School A7F

While the girls watched soap operas, they were not drawn into them as models for their own lives, and did not see close connections between their lives and the lives of the characters in these shows. They were critical of the shows, particularly of the story lines in 'Home and Away' and the over-dramatisation of small incidents as highlighted in the following samples from focus group conversation where P3 compared 'Home and Away' to 'Neighbours':

P3: It's not like 'Home and Away', coz they just keep on repeating the same stuff, but with this one I keep on seeing different things ... someone leaves, someone follows, someone gets crushed by a building, someone dies, someone crawls under a house, has to get back out, someone gets shot or something like that. It's all ... what's going to happen now?

P4: There's something interesting in every episode, or something bad happens and they don't really happen that often like people dying or he fractured his spine ... it doesn't happen every day.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

While P3 liked ‘Neighbours’, because *I keep on seeing different things*, her conversation reflected the type of exaggerations that she had noted in the other soap opera and described the over-dramatisation already critically commented on. P4 appeared more aware of the similarity between the shows.

There were similar feelings about soap operas from both groups of Year 7/8 girls, which substantiated the sense that, while they watched them *coz everyone likes it* (Participant, Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8), they felt ambivalent about the value of the genre as a reflection on their world. Their strong feelings about soap operas were different to their engagement with individual movies or series on television. They did not mention that other weekly series, where the plot lines were about characters involved in shopping, going to parties and being with friends without over-dramatisation or major catastrophes, had similarities to the soap opera scripts, but appeared to find the plot lines in these shows more connected to their lives.

As the girls filled in their journal log pages, their thoughts about the content of popular culture were further clarified with comments such as the following that they wrote in response to their viewing:

Watched a program and felt like I should be doing nicer things for people/being a better person in general ... I thought about if those things were to happen to me and also how they related to my life ...

Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7L

4.3.4 Making Choices about Viewing

An aspect of the girls’ interaction with visual media such as television was that they expressed clear preferences for the types of show watched. As the following excerpts show, the girls’ response to a question of what they watched showed that they enjoyed particular shows as a priority and shared preferences with other girls in their group.

P6: ‘MasterChef’.

P4: I like murder shows—murder shows are cool.

P3: Ditto. And ‘Packed to the Rafters’.

P4: Yeah, I love ‘Packed to the Rafters’.

P2: That one’s good. It’s like the maddest show

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P1: I watch murder shows sometimes.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P3: There used to be a show on TV called 'What's Good for You' and they say what's good for you and what's not and everyone does what they say...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P2: I still tend to watch 'Bad Girls' but it's not on Monday nights, and I watch 'Glee' on Thursday nights.

P1: Yeah.

P2: And then 'Spicks and Specks' on Wednesday nights.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&L

Australia's 'New [sic] Top Model' ...this is my favourite show ... they had to make up a line and someone stole someone else's ...it was really funny.

Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7B

P4: My favourite one's 'Bones' and ... other crime show stuff. My favourite one is 'Bones' ... I just like it cause ... there's a really good story and it sucks you in from the beginning, and Mum's like, 'Oh, go to bed' and I want to watch and hang on until the end.

P5: My two favourite murder shows probably would be 'Dexter' and 'Harpers Island'.

P4: 'Dexter' because it was really gruesome and creeps me out ... I loved it. And 'Harpers Island' ... it creeps me out.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

R: What's the appeal with a murder show?

P1: I don't know.

P4: It's fun.

P3: I like the gruesome grues-ifying [sic] sort of stuff, all the blood and guts and stuff.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P: 'MasterChef'—I watch it, because we like it ... as a whole family.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&L

P1's family had only recently accessed television on a regular basis. Her television preferences reflected her aspirations to work with animals, and her interest in performance and developing skills, which had been expressed previously.

P1: The only shows I really watch is 'The Zoo' on Monday ... because the animals ...

R: Because animals, yeah [laughs].

P1: And then sometimes when a show they've got talent on, and...

P2: 'Masterchef' sometimes.

P1: Or a wildlife show.

P2: And then, on Thursdays I watch 'Glee'.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&L

As someone new to regular television it was interesting that P1 already had clear preferences for the shows others had mentioned, but also that she enjoyed one show that reflected the personal aspirations she had talked about earlier.

4.3.5 Interacting with Printed Media

Young girls read magazines, perhaps because they were accessible and portable, and attracted less parental monitoring than television. While magazines may have an assumed target audience, it was clear that these girls read a range of magazines targeting age groups beyond 12 to 14 years of age. When asked, the girls listed titles of magazines that included 'Dolly', 'Horse Lives', 'Girlfriend', 'M', 'Famous', 'New Weekly', 'OK' and 'Kaleidoscope'. They also identified that they read football and riding magazines, reflecting their broader interests.

'Dolly' and 'Girlfriend' are Australian magazines with content predominantly about fashion and relationship advice, and 'M' is an American publication that focuses on celebrities and teenage life but is readily available in Australian retail outlets. 'Kaleidoscope' is an American art-based magazine and presents as a sophisticated exhibition of the current art scene, as opposed to the television/movie scene. It was only mentioned by one participant across the Year 7/8 group. While the Year 7/8 girls identified printed media they interacted with, the detail of what they read and why they read the magazines was not evident in the data. This is different to the amount of content that they discussed for visual media. It was clear that they responded to the images in magazines, as they talked at length about the editing of photos but they did not discuss what they read.

4.3.6 Interacting with Social Media

The girls in Year 7/8 used the tools of social media for communication with their peers. These tools were a cheap way to connect with their local friends and family and a substitute for landline phone calls. Access to social media tools was important. For

some girls, their rural address made access difficult or more complex as they only had dial-up access, which limited connection speeds. This made downloading and contributing to social networking sites difficult, resulting in some pressure around involvement in online activity. In the excerpts below, the issue of access is raised:

P: A lot of my friends go ‘you have to go on MSN’—that’s ... where you go on the internet and its free but it’s not really because you have to pay to go on the Internet or mum and dad do and you can chat to people.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P: They want me to have MSN. I want it. My friend doesn’t have a phone but she has MSN so she wanted me to have MSN so I can chat to her.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

Time spent online was sometimes considerable, as indicated by P3:

P3: Sometimes I get really into it and I’m on there every day and ... sometimes I just go don’t want to be on here anymore and ... I just take a break. I just don’t like being on there all the time ... I haven’t been on Facebook or MSN or checked my emails for the past three days.

Focus Group 1, School B, Year 7/8

It was interesting that P3 monitored her own engagement, could identify the amount of time she spent connected, and that she kept count of when she was not online. This comment was said with a clear tone of surprise at the length of time that she had been off-line. The interview conversations and journal log entries clarified the tools with which the girls interacted. In their interview, S and M recounted using Facebook, MSN and Twitter. Their chief online communication was with those around them as the following comment by M showed:

R: Is the conversation largely with people that you see all the time or is it more people than that?

M: People that we usually see. Our friends, we don’t chat to any people that we don’t really talk to at school.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M

This was not consistent across the group as is evident in the journal log entries from across the group:

12/9: Internet ... 20 mins ... went on a social network site, so read things about people I know and thought about the things they had written.

Journal Log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7L

9/5: Internet ... 3 hours ... talking with others ... talked with 5 people ...

Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

8/6: Computer ...5 hours ... chatted with T... read on f.f.net ... chatted with randoms on Teenchat ...T was a bit boring but I helped him with some probs. Random people were scary ...just re-reading fuzzy stuff.

14/6: Computed ... formed. Chatted, f.f.netted ...chattd to K about music, talked about cybersex with T. (don't ask)

Journal log entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7B

22/6: Internet ...2 hours ...went online, played some games, went on Bebo ...felt happy because I wss talking to some friends ...

23/6: Internet ...3 hours ...I went on Bebo ...Bebo was cool ...talked to my cousin I haven't seen for a long time.

1/7: Internet ... 1½ hours ... went on eBay and Bebo ...looked at scrap booking stuff ...talked to A+J+B

3/7: Internet ...2 hours ...Bebo/eBay/MSN ...I talked to heaps of friends ...

Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7F

28/6: MSN/Internet ... ½ hour ...tried to talk to someone but didn't respond ... read emails ...went on Internet ...I read my emails, some chain mail, funny pictures, the usual. Had a look at my friend's website.

Journal log entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7E

The girls spent varying amounts of time interacting with others, and viewing sites on the internet. Their engagement was somewhat random but it was evident that having access allowed them to choose when to connect with others and who to talk to. While they generally appeared to connect with friends there was some indication that their virtual communication included people they normally did not speak to and opened up topics that normally would not be shared.

These virtual networks allowed for multi-tasking. They offered a way of getting help with homework. For those who had easy access it was clear that they were online for long periods of time, and kept the links open just in case someone came online. In these responses, the girls explain what they talk about when online:

P1: Events that would happen ... if someone's gone somewhere or someone's said something or if you've just got something or homework and you send something to someone ...

P2: You don't really talk about things but 'Hello, how are you?'

P3: ... you just say hello and then you say goodbye and sometimes you just keep talking for ages and you can't do what you want on the computer coz you are just talking too much.

P4: ... just sit there for half an hour just doing webcam and then we start talking and then we'll do webcam again ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P: I have a laptop in my room so like, I leave it on ... all day, I talk to ... all my friends on MSN; others on Bebo and stuff. It's just so good, it's 'communication'.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

The girls' comments highlighted that, when connection online is easy, this form of popular culture can become an endemic part of their lifestyle. Virtual access created a social link and the girls enjoyed the opportunity to talk to others in different locations. They did not connect to websites designed to bring girls together, and they did not utilise the online networks as a way of being outspoken or making a statement. Rather, the place of virtual communication networks for these girls was in allowing them opportunities to communicate with their friends and a widening circle of friends through others.

4.3.7 The Characters in Popular Culture

As the girls responded to, and interacted with, popular culture they were provided with information about other people's lives in great detail. The girls noticed that one of the key features of popular culture is the detail of how celebrities and others lived in their daily lives.

It's amazing at the fact that if a celebrity gets drunk it's public in two seconds but if someone normal did it no-one could give a stuff. It's nuts.

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7D

A vast quantity of information about celebrities entered conversation whenever we talked about popular culture. One of the ways popular culture was defined for these girls appeared to be through the people reported on in the media. There was not a division between the categories of celebrities as they were talked about, and at times the conversation was focused on sport stars, music stars or movie stars. The names of stars filled conversation, with a range of the most popular ones appearing quite frequently. In her journal, B7C created a full web diagram showing the connections between the members of the 'Jonas Brothers' (musical group) and filled the pages with pictures and positive comments about them and their ability: *such good singers*

... songs have meaning and their vocals make the songs ... coolest boy band ever (Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C). Visual media stars were also talked about, used as role models and critiqued for their behaviour and appearance. Appendix 14 highlights the many names, movie or television show titles, magazines and other items from popular culture that came up in conversation over the series of focus groups. The sheer quantity of names mentioned in conversation indicated how deeply popular culture has become embedded in the lives of these girls, and suggests that they could respond to implicit messages delivered by people rather than explicit messages delivered by the content.

The girls showed a high interest in the lives of these mediated individuals, sometimes expressing strong opinions about them, based on what they had read and seen in magazines, on the Internet or on television. It is clear from the excerpt below that it was possible to feel very familiar with an idol because of what was shown in the media.

- R: When you idolise someone ... is it because they have qualities that you like in them? What makes you idolise them?
- P1: Well for starters they are pretty cute and Miley Cyrus is awesome.
- P2: I really like them.
- P1: But their songs have meanings and stuff and ...
- R: Do they write their own songs?
- P1: Yeah.
- P1: They are really cool, down to earth people.
- R: How do you know they are though? Isn't that just what the media presents to you?
- P3: Yeah, you have never met them.
- P1: With them, they have this new movie coming out, I can't wait to see it ... they go inside their life and stuff for the cameras, like their house. ... they go on about stuff and how people that are their friends tell them how they actually are and they are really cool people.

Focus Group 2, School B, Year 7/8

P1's opinion of the 'Jonas Brothers' had a sense of familiarity that other participants questioned. P1 obviously believed what she had seen or read about the 'Jonas Brothers' in the media.

The girls talked about the stars featured regularly in popular culture as both icons and real people and described how these people influence how the viewer feels about

themselves. Their ideas are evident in the following excerpts of focus group conversations:

P: For some girls, who idolise people like Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan ... will think, 'Oh, it's cool coz they're doing it so let's do it' and for some people like us we just think 'No'.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P1: ... you see them and they're all so skinny and they've got all the perfect legs and hair and then they go, 'Oh I'm fat I've got to ... not eat so I get as skinny as her and look as good as her'.

R: Do they? Is that what it does to you?

P1: To some people with low self-esteem it does.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

Both P and P1 felt able to resist being caught up in the imitation of the celebrity lifestyle. Individual girls in the groups admired favourite stars as evidenced below in comments from their journals:

I still love to watch 'Hannah Montana' ... her songs are amazing ... her new song is so meaningful and it is something we can all relate [to]

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

Pink is absolutely awesome ... me and my mum went ... and watched Pink. She was absolutely awesome ...

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7E

There were also strong opinions and judgments about their choices and lives, based on what was shown in the media, as these comments showed:

P1: ... they're doing it to themselves ... who'd want to end up like them coz they're doing things like going out late nights every night, drinking every night, in the mornings and smoking all the time ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

The contradiction of opinion was developed from the information provided in popular culture, but the girls responded to the messages as truth, asking questions such as *who'd want to end up like them?* (Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8). This suggested that, for at least one participant, the life of the celebrity was not something to aspire to. Further comments in other focus groups reinforced this perception, as shown in this interaction:

P4: I wouldn't like it because you would not get any privacy ... always have the cameras in your face and they wouldn't leave you alone and they'd say horrible things about you in the magazines.

P1: Celebrities don't have a life ... they can't just go down to the shops or go shopping; they have to stay in their million-dollar mansions.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

I think celebrities just let it all go to their heads. Fame, fortune, paparazzi, it just seems like a fairy story to ordinary people like us but it's just reality. You want fame and fortune and fans you will have to get used to no privacy ... I think that's why they go phsycho [sic] for no reason. They just can't handle it ... I have to admit I do feel sorry for them at times.

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

The intrusion of popular culture into the lives of celebrities was not seen as welcome. Sometimes it was hard to discern if they were seeing the characters and the stars as constructions or as real people (*But I'm confused, which one's real and which one's not real?* Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8), although at other times it was clear that they recognised the impact of the media on the way the stars lived their lives. Further comments reinforced that the girls recognised what celebrities experienced as a result of being famous:

P1: ... everyone is looking at them ... they want to make sure they look perfect coz they're celebrities and role models ... so they make themselves do these things and screwing up their lives

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P1: ... I wonder if they go into depression ... because the paparazzi and stuff are ... in their face ... who cares if they are going shopping in a normal supermarket? Do you seriously have to go up to them and hide in bushes and stuff and stalk them and stuff? Can't you just leave them alone?

P4: I reckon the paparazzi is what turned ... Britney Spears off the rails because she was really good ... the press and paparazzi were catching every single moment of her and no wonder she lashed out at the paparazzi with the umbrella. I would too ... 'Britney, Britney, Britney, Britney!' I would just be like, 'Back off you bums'.

P4: No, they need personal space and they're not giving it to them and they're always, 'Come on, come on, picture, picture' [using dramatic voice]

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

While they were interested in knowing about the lives of celebrities, the girls did not necessarily want the life of a celebrity, and they had concerns about the way these people were pursued for news items, not able to live ordinary lives, and sometimes challenged by the way they were always in the public eye. There was a sense of

unfairness as they imagined what it would be like to be these people, which sometimes contradicted the comments they made about lifestyle. The following excerpt illustrates this feeling:

- R: So none of you aspire to be one of those celebrities?
- P1: No.
- R: Why not? Isn't that what it is all about?
- P2: Coz ... they say horrible stuff about celebrities in magazines and do you want them saying that about you?
- P3: True.
- P2: I like watching movies but I don't want to be in them.
- P1: I think it's that you don't want to be picture perfect and you don't want to do those things.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

While the girls enjoyed being entertained by the stars they admired, they could recognise that they themselves did not want to live in the same way. Celebrities were talked about in a way that acknowledged them as role models, particularly to girls younger than the participants, with an emphasis on appearance and thinness, but they were not seen as leaders because of their negative social behaviours, as indicated in this response to my question: *Are they leaders?*

- P1: No, not necessarily, cause a lot of movie stars and ... they get caught with drugs or speeding offences, and end up in jail.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

Choices the girls made were based on what others thought as well as their own considered opinion, in response to the messages they were receiving. In the interview with J and L, they clarified that they did not feel that famous people always made *smart choices*, as this excerpt shows:

- R: What type of famous people do you look up to?
- P1: The ones that make the smart choices.
- R: And so what do you define as a smart choice?
- P2: Not doing drugs and stuff.

Interview, School B, Year 7/8, J&L

Involvement with drugs was not the girls' idea of a smart choice, but a key part of the celebrity lives shown in popular culture. In this way, the girls' response to this aspect of popular culture was to reject it, not seeing it as informative for their lives and not

wanting to copy the choices highlighted in the popular culture with which they engaged.

4.3.8 How Girls Feel About Popular Culture

The concept of being influenced in making life choices based on what was shown in popular culture raised interesting comments about feelings towards popular culture, as shown in the following comments:

- R: Does popular culture actually influence what you want to do with the rest of your life?
- P1: Sort of. If there was a good thing on, like a really [good show on] Miley Cyrus ... I probably would want to be like her, but I can't so I don't really think about that.
- P1: Well, I like acting, but I don't really see myself in that career.
- P2: I want to be a model ... but it might not happen ...
- R: Do things like 'Australia's Best [sic] Model' or 'Top Ten Models', do ... you watch those and think, that's how I have to be?
- P2: I watch them and ... 'cause it's North America I watch ... and think 'Nuh, I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be all whingy, tough person, anorexic or anything'.
- P1: There was one where the judges told [someone] to lose weight and she was already skinny and she felt like [she couldn't just] go and be comfortable.
- P2: I've got a cousin that does modeling and she is a manager of a modeling company ... and she's not anorexic or skinny ... She's just normal and I want to be like that. If I could, I want to have a job like her and not be absolutely anorexic.

Interview, School B, Year 7/8, J&L

Within this interaction there are a number of indicators that, while the girls responded to the lives they saw in, and experienced through, popular culture they also recognised that what was shown was not necessarily real, or the best way to be. They expressed an awareness of the construction of popular culture and a mistrust in what was reported, in particular in magazines.

- P1: I try to avoid them because they're like full of lies.
- P2: ... they add to the people.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

This was a common theme with the Year 7/8 group, where the girls felt that popular culture was sometimes an unreliable source of information, and that those who

constructed the content tended to create particular perspectives to influence people.

This theme of conversation was continued in the excerpt below:

P1: .. they'll grab snippets of things and take photos ... fake photos ... and make a big fuss ... it gives them money and magazines ... with fashion ladies ... most of them have like freckles ... or pimples ... and on the computer they take it away and they have ... skinny models and basically ... no one is like that and they make other people think that they're fat and want to be like that ...

Participant, Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

I was reading a magazine and it had heaps of pics of celebs without makeup. It was good and half of them looked like normal people and they said they looked terrible.

Journal entry, Year 7/8, School B, B7B

The tampering with images to improve the appearance of models made these girls feel that magazine images were not true representations of the reality for most people. Reflecting on her responses, B7B indicated that she preferred the more natural look despite the magazine images. The girls described this as a problem that impacted on self-esteem and confidence for those who read the magazines, as the comment below shows:

P4: ... with the media and magazines ... they're making it more shallow and more ... materialistic and superficial.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

These comments demonstrate that the girls recognised the impact visual media could have on girls their age. For these girls, while they were able to talk about it and critique it, it was evident that their interactions with the various magazines had also made them conscious of where they were not perfect. Key messages from the printed media were about appearance and behaviour, and in this sense the girls identified that the media could influence one's self-esteem or image.

As the girls talked about further manipulation of visual images, they discussed the impact on the audience, the power of the visual in influencing people, and the exaggerated views that were often portrayed as real. They provided considerable information about the process of adjusting pictures to be more aesthetically appealing to the viewer, as indicated in this interaction between two girls:

P1: They'll take a picture of some girl ... they might not like her eyebrows—they might be too thin ... her complexion might not be right so they'll go over it on the computer and make her face skinnier ...

P2: ... airbrush her face and take out any blemishes ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The concept of airbrushing images, and removing less acceptable features, struck this group as an important concern and they continued the discussion for a considerable time, bringing it back up later in the focus group. The following excerpts report their discussion:

P1: ... how they alter people's appearances in some of the pictures ... can tell that they're fake because their legs: they will be all shiny and sparkly and not real ...

P2: ... and the arms will be ... fine and the face won't have a single bit wrong and have strong cheek bones and everything fake...

P4: ... and you can see they've got airbrushed ... tons of makeup coz I once saw this picture of this girl and she ... was standing there and she had no lines at all and ... her face was almost white and she had these bright red lips and then ... you couldn't see the cheeks or any of the lines ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

P5: ... on the news ... the woman that does it ... they put so much foundation on ... you can't see their face ... no freckles, no wrinkles ... face is perfect.

P2: But no one's face can be perfect.

P3: ... some people's skin and face is good naturally but a lot of it's not ...

P6: ... on the TV when there's ads ... for a new make up or ... a new sort of face thing ...

P1: Mineral foundation ...

P6: ... there's a celebrity on there like Vanessa Hutchins or Anne Hathaway ... and they've actually been using it and they use to on the ad and then everyone wants it because they look up to who's using it or they think it makes you look good but ... it mightn't.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

There was evidence in their conversation that they understood the purpose of creating perfect images for audience satisfaction but were critical of the process. Despite this criticism, they still followed the trends as shown in the media.

R: Do you take notice of the images on popular culture or is it something out here to the side?

S: Yeah, it does effect what you do and stuff.

M: If you're going to be the coolest person ever. Do you know, like, accepted or something ...

R: And those images are ones that come from popular culture?

M: Yeah.

S: ... the clothes that you have to buy, all that stuff.

R: Do you buy into that? Do you worry that you haven't got the right clothes on or the right shoes or whatever?

M: Sometimes.

R: What makes you do it and what makes you not do it?

M: It's nice to have stuff like that, I guess.

S: ... it makes you feel better, but it shouldn't, because ... you are you.

M: ... you are going to get bagged out if you don't have it.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M

For both S and M, there was an awareness of the impact of popular culture on their choices at times and they felt good when they had responded to what popular culture suggested, even as they recognised the message it conveyed about self-esteem. It was also clear that it was not only the images in popular culture that impacted on the choices girls made, but also the peer group, who may have been responding to popular culture as they decided on trends.

As well as questioning the construction of images for display, the girls asked questions about the way the information was gathered for presentation. A frequent topic of conversation highlighted the concern the girls had around the construction of media reports with a particular view or perspective. They showed an awareness of the purposeful construction of media content to show particular views or features when they made comments such as:

P1: ... they just make up random stuff ... they'll take something ... small and then they'll add all ... to it to make it really big and extravagant ... and it's all lies.

Focus group 1. School A, Year 7/8

This interaction between M and S in the interview expressed further how their choices were influenced:

P: I don't wear things ... like all popular people wear. You don't have to be exactly the same; otherwise ... they bag you out.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M

The girls recognised that while their choices were influenced by others from both popular culture and their peer group, they could make their own choices, as M expressed below:

P: I don't like copying people, being someone else ... I don't want to be like them.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8

4.4 Giftedness

4.4.1 Being Identified as Gifted

The concept of giftedness was something new to these girls. In the conversation in the first focus group I wondered how they defined the word 'gifted' as a response to being chosen to be involved in a project on gifted girls. As the following excerpt indicated, the girls had a simple definition:

P1: Smart [when she said this others nodded in agreement, and indicated that they agreed with the definition].

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The conversation in the first focus groups addressed the responses of the girls' parents to their nominations as gifted individuals within their year groups. In most instances the girls reported that their parents were more pleased than the girls that they were included in this project which gave them the identity of gifted. The excerpt below highlights the response the parents of the Year 7/8 group had to the invitation to join the research:

P2: My mum ... 'yay you're doing it, you're one of the top 10 in Year 7/8, yay!'

P1: ... it was like I was special and I had to tell everyone about it and I was ... 'no!'

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

Being identified for the research project was a positive event for these girls, challenging them to think about themselves differently as their potential ability was acknowledged by the schools and their parents. However, despite not having been given the label of gifted prior to this project, the girls had been aware of differences that existed between themselves and other girls. The data indicated that the girls had a sense of individuality and enjoyed it. They appreciated the differences between individuals and had found friends from a range of different groups. The following excerpts show that these girls distinguished themselves from those who were popular within the grade:

P1: Last year there were two groups that were really popular, and the boys always used to hang out with them ...

P3: We're really average, but normal.

P2: They were ... my friends, those so called popular group ... but my group is the group that everyone ... looks at because all the boys hang around ... a couple of girls ... on Friday went for a smoke ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P1: ...they're just around ... they hang round wearing those ugly outfits that show everything and they think they're all cool and stuff and just coz you don't they make up weird language type stuff

P1: My mum ... raised me to do things that I want to do and to do what I think is right and wrong ... if I know something is wrong I won't do it because then I know I'll get in really big trouble from my dad ... so I just do what I think is right ... some of the things that I hear girls doing ... I'm like 'How do you do that? You know you're just going to get in trouble and caught...'

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

P1: There's too many people ...who want to be like everyone else ...

P1: But it's fine being an individual.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

They emphasised their sense of individuality although there was a sense of compliance from P1. Her choice to be different was coloured by her preference for not getting into trouble. The popular group was identified as the group that was attractive to boys, or at the least, already interested in connecting with boys and in testing limits. Their clothing and manner were not seen as attractive by these girls who felt confident to do what they wanted to do.

During the first conversation the girls were not describing themselves strictly in terms of the label of giftedness they had acquired, but responding to what made them different to other girls. In the second focus group I was less hesitant to use the term gifted and directly asked the participants about their ideas and thinking about it. This generated some conversation about other people more than about themselves, though it opened up the chance to see what they thought about the concept and how they viewed it. They talked about a definition, including themselves in the category as the excerpts below show:

P4: It's kind of the same as a smart person because they have got special gifts ... and they can make the right decision as well.

Focus group 2, School B Year 7/8

P1: I think everyone's gifted. Everyone's given a gift ... they're ... born. Some people can ... draw, some people can write, some people can sing, some people shouldn't sing.

P3: ... everyone's gifted with something. Sometimes some people just have trouble finding it.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P2: ... my tennis teacher ... he said ... I was naturally good at sport ... I was gifted at sport, and I didn't believe him at first.

R: So now why do you believe him?

P2: Because I've reached my goal in sport. I made it to State, and so, I reached my goal.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P1: Normally everyone has like a special talent, like either drawing or sport.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

Being gifted was noted to be about natural ability and being able to do things with relative ease, though this did not preclude hard work, and sometimes having poorer social skills. This journal entry showed how the participant believed others viewed those who were smart:

7 June 2009: Sometimes I hate being smart, It always seems as though when you are smart your friendships aren't the best. You don't have as many friends as others and you have to be someone you're not to fit in! Being yourself is like a sin against your friends in the modern world. I just wish I would be myself and still have friends that like me for me, not for what I pretend to be. Many of my friends know the real me but the ones that don't ...well they are the ones who aren't really smart, they're sort of dumb. Although I am smarter than my best friend but in our friendship we never really say much about it. When your [sic] smart people just boss and push you around thinking that we don't know how a friend should act because we don't have many. Although not having many does cause you to read friendship books so you can keep the ones you do have. I just wish that they could stand in our shoes for a while to just know how it feels but I guess they'll never know because they are caught up. Caught up with friends! But I would never change being smart because I love it and its[sic] just who I am, ME.

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

This entry highlighted the struggle it had been for this participant to connect with others and to find her identity. She had already felt the pressure of changing herself to be accepted, contradicting her desire to be herself. The earlier conversation highlighted that giftedness was noticed in sport or creative fields, and that it was something everyone had, a common misconception when talking about giftedness. There was an amount of misunderstanding around what it meant in other areas, and an indication that in general it was not acceptable to be 'smart', as P alluded to below:

P: Yes, I'm awesomely smart [mocking tone in voice].

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

The mocking tone in P's voice was affirmed by the other girls in the group. She seemed embarrassed to be talking about herself in this way and amused the rest of the group by not being serious about what it meant. The conversation continued in the group, however, and as it did, it became clear that the girls had noticed differences in their responses and thinking. They made plans and saw a future for themselves that they did not necessarily think others did. The following excerpt reflects their deeper thinking about the question of giftedness from a personal point of view:

R: What does it mean to be smart?

P4: It means that you're just smart.

R: But what does it mean though?

P4: ... make the right decisions.

P7: To know things.

R: You're talking about school smart but you're talking about different smarts?

P7: It's kind of like you know all the answers in everything and you are in all the top classes ...

P5: You actually try and do stuff.

P1: You actually think about what you're going to do; you don't just actually do it.
You think about what you are going to do and what might happen.

P7: You actually want to have a life, not ... being dropped into every type of job.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

P: If you're ... smarter and you can ... get better marks and you can get a better job
when you're older.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

Being gifted meant not having to be so stressed about school work and sometimes being chosen to be involved in extra programs. The girls had not always been sure why they were chosen and sometimes found it embarrassing in front of everyone else. It was clear that they had realised they were capable in terms of their school experience but that they were factual rather than boastful about it. Because they were exploring the concept of being identified as gifted, and their feelings about this, the conversation turned to life at school, how they viewed it, and what they considered to be the impact of their ability on their school experience.

4.4.2: The Impact of Ability on School Experience

The impact the girls' ability had on their school life was also talked about in terms of their teachers and the work expected of them. In the excerpts below, the girls talk about their school experiences.

P: ... in a test ... you don't need teacher's help all the time.

P: Sometimes some things are hard ... for me, but they might not be hard forother people.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

R: Do teachers treat you differently because you're smart?

P: Not really because we are all in the top classes and basically everyone [is smart] so that teachers don't really teach us that different.

R: But do they treat you as a class differently to the other classes?

P: ... they can get through a lot of stuff quicker than they can with the other people who are in the lower classes ... my maths teacher, that's his opinion ... we will get through a lot more stuff when other classes are ... only on times tables or something.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

P7: In primary school there used to be this group of ... people who didn't know their times tables and ... they used to get ... all the attention in the class and ... the smart people, they would just ignore you basically.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

The girls recognised that teachers would acknowledge their ability by working at a faster pace with them. They felt that teachers did not offer them as much help with their work, as they did not expect that they would need help. In their interview, E and R indicated that they did not have to work hard at school.

R: Do you work hard?

P1: No [laugh].

P2: ... sometimes, yeah ... Science and stuff and sometimes study for tests but that's about it. I rarely do homework, well we only really get it in maths and I copy out of the book for that ... [laugh].

R: So how would school be better for you?

P2: I don't know, I guess I like it the way it is ... I like coming to school every morning to see my friends and that's about it, there's nothing really.

Interview, School B, Year 7/8, E&R

For these Year 7/8 girls, there was a sense of boredom and opportunity to find things to do in class to entertain themselves, although this did not seem to attract teacher attention and they talked about these activities with no sense of being in trouble in school.

R: What do you actually do in class to make it more interesting? ... P4 laughs and you laugh at her and she's the clown to make you distracted. What other things do you do if it's boring?

P3: We sit there and...

P1: ... plays on her phone.

P4: I didn't! That was one time in health, one time.

P1: And she plays on her DSi in music.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

R: Did you get in trouble?

P4: No.

R: Why didn't you get in trouble?

P4: We get our work done and they don't really care.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

P: We don't get in trouble ... we can listen to our iPods and he says, 'As long as I can't hear them and you get the work done, I don't care'.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

Making these comments acknowledged that there were times in school when the girls did not behave in class, but the comments also identified that completing tasks was seen as important in the eyes of the teachers. From the perspective of the girls, teachers did not mind their misbehaviour as they were still able to complete set work. Their activity seemed to be about amusing themselves rather than disrupting others. They felt that the teachers did not care about what they were doing, but it was not evident in their comments that they felt the teachers did not like them. School life was not always easy though. Sometimes teachers expected that, as bright students, these girls would be able to work at a fast pace all the time, as the following interaction shows:

P: Teachers ... go too fast, when you are trying to figure out a problem which you have never even heard of before and you are trying to do it and he's done about ten and then he reckons we should be ahead of him, so most of the time you sort of just copy it down and you half do it because he's just too fast ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

The girl in this interaction felt pressured to work quickly and was not given time to focus or practice her work. Later in the conversation, the discussion turned to how teachers treated them as a group, and it was evident that they noticed a difference between teacher responses to them and to others who needed more support in classrooms from this comment:

R: Do you think that teachers think that you don't need help when you're smart?

P: ... I know our teacher, my brother has this hearing problem and I think because she knew how smart I was, she is treating him ... as if he were really smart and it's not fair because he can't hear ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

Some girls defined a good teacher as one who treated everyone equitably.

P7: At my old school we had this really cool teacher ... she wouldn't favour anyone, she didn't label anyone ... and she just treated everyone equal ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

And for others, a good teacher recognised that sometimes they all needed help, and made this clear to them that the role of the teacher was to help.

- P4 ... my Year 6 teacher ...most of us were pretty right with work ... not all of us needed help ... when we did need help, he would be there ready to help us and he says, 'Don't ask the person sitting next to you, come and ask me if you need help'.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

The relationship with teachers was important in the way the girls perceived school. While the girls judged teachers according to how the teacher responded to them, there was evidence that teachers did not always know what the girls were doing or what they were capable of achieving. Simply completing work was deemed by the girls as the indicator of being successful in classrooms. But, as the following comment showed, there were times when being smart was not a good thing for the girls:

- P: ... it can be a bit of a battle when you are really smart because people call you a nerd ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

This was made as a summary statement which ended the conversation at that point during the focus group and the other participants indicated support for the idea through nodding their heads. The girls in Year 7/8 at School B were open in discussing their school life, and the experiences they had in the classroom in relation to their ability and giftedness. The girls in School A did not talk as much about their classrooms. Their conversation focused more strongly on the relationships they had with their peers and their families.

4.4.3 The Power of Friends

An important influence on the girls came from their friends and friendships. Friends could have a range of abilities but it became different when school separated groups into classes.

- R: Do you think you make friends with people who are at the same level of intelligence as you?
- P: Not always.
- P: No, not always.
- P: Sometimes.
- P: Usually you make friends before you know how ... smart they are.
- P: At my old school I made friends with people who were a bit, well, not dumb.
- P: But not as smart as you.
- P: Yeah, not as smart as me because I always got A's and they sometimes got C's and D's, but I didn't really care.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: When you go into high school and you get split up into different classes ... it's nice to know people who you know, so you're not by yourself all the time.
- P: Know people who are nice.
- P: So you're not a loner.
- P: So if you are smart and then everyone's really dumb and you're in a higher class and they're all in the lower class.
- R: All through primary school you've been in what's called parallel classes ... mixture of abilities ... once you get into high school it's often streamed ... Do you feel a difference in your classes and stuff like that?
- P: You're not with your friends, so you feel uncomfortable because you're by yourself and you don't fit in.
- P: And everyone's all sort of bunched up together, like they all are trying to answer the same question. Where in primary school it's sometimes just only one person that knows it.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

Friendships formed for reasons other than, and despite of, ability. The girls had identified this even before they were labelled for this project and they accepted this difference. They noticed it more in high school where they were grouped by ability. This had sometimes left them feeling alone in a class. It challenged their self-perception, and having to compete for having the answers appeared to be a new experience.

In high school there was more opportunity to meet with like minds, which afforded freedom to be natural. For those in the Year 7/8 focus groups the context was still quite new and participants were experiencing changes in their friendships as they entered the school from a range of feeder schools. Over the year of collecting data from focus groups they all experienced changes in friends, themselves and the way they connected with others, which in turn impacted on their sense of self. The following excerpts of conversation highlight this.

- R: Think back to what you were like at the beginning of the year in terms of what you did. How have you changed?
- P: I didn't know anyone when I came so I was ... intimidated ... shy... now I really know anyone in this group.
- P: Oh, we're insignificant now.
- P: ... I came from the bigger public schools and there was [sic] a lot of people but ... only two people I knew in my class from my old public school.

- P: And they were two people that I rarely hung around with in primary school, so I didn't know anyone so I was really shy ... But then ... I sat with P and P and P ... and now I'm really loud [laugh]. I didn't know anyone except for ... boys who come from that school.
- P: That's the same with me. And probably P because I came from a Catholic school and only five people from my school came and all the others were boys ... I didn't have ... any friends that came from my old school.
- P: There's only ... four people that came from my school and ... I hung out with them but at the start of the year I tried to fit in with ... the popular groups ... I didn't feel comfortable with them ...
- P: You want to be yourself.
- P: Yeah, I wasn't myself when I was around them and now ... I hang out with the boys in Year 10 and I'm loud and I am who I am.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: But you can still be popular and be smart. No offence ... but like P2 is smart and she's got lots of friends ...
- R: So what do you do P2?
- P: But she's not mean or anything.
- P2: What do you mean?
- R: Why are you smart and popular?
- P2: I don't know. It's how people ... look at you.
- P: It's probably got a lot to do with first impressions.
- R: So do you pretend to be dumb when you're with them?
- P2: Not really.
- R: You just be yourself.
- P2: Yeah
- P: Some people just like some people ... they don't have a reason really.
- P: It depends You've been smart ... you've always been smart and ... you have a group of friends and it just expands and you just get more and more friends and they don't care about how smart you are or how dumb you are.
- R: They care about what you can do with each other and the jokes you have ...?
- P: Personality.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

It was clear that relationships formed an important part of the girls' daily lives, and that they were seeking to find the group that best supported their individual needs. For these girls this re-grouping led to a stronger sense of self, and a chance to meet others who reflected their core sense of self more closely than previous school groups. These girls were part of various circles of friends, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes dependent on class composition.

The beginning of high school had been a lonely time for some as groups formed and reformed, bringing together members from different feeder schools and creating a need for new friendships and groups. At the outset of the research, the recent transition to new school settings meant some girls were still experiencing the establishment of new friendships. They had attended a variety of primary schools and in both School A and School B, they had been friends with at least one of the members of the group they were in for a long period of time, and still maintained friendships that grew out of being together in school settings.

Primary school populations are drawn from a designated geographical area around the school. Rural secondary schools draw from wide geographical areas, bringing together students from different primary schools. The girls noted that there had been changes in their friendship groups, but that they remained friends with peers from earlier schools, as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

R: Do your friends change as you come into high school? Do you find that you found different friends?

P: Yes.

P: Yeah ... you've got your group ... it kind of just expands and ... people flow off ... come and go ...

P: ... when in primary school there was me, and about five other people, in our friendship group, but now I've moved to another group and there's ten.

P: ... last year, half of our group was Year 5, so most of our group was left behind and... most of the other kids in our group went to School B ...

P: So now it was basically just me and P from our group ...

P: It was only us two.

P: And then we ... made all new friends and stuff.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

I believe that when girls hit high school a lot of them change, most not for the better. Friends of mine from primary school that now go to XXX swear more, obsess over what they look like and pile on makeup, think that they're cool by mucking up in class and giving the teachers a hard time. I myself have changed. I care what I look like more.

Journal entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7D

The changes in groups were something important to the girls from School A and clearly something they had noted prior to this conversation. In her journal, participant

A7D had also noted that some girls change. She felt that this was not necessarily a positive change but that it might explain some changes in friendships.

By the time of the interviews in Year 8, there had been further changes, but for some of the girls this was positive, as discussed in the interview excerpt below:

- R: What about your friend relationships? Have they changed since last year?
- P1: Not really.
- R: You're still friends with the same people?
- P1: I've made better relationships with people that I knew.
- R: From the same school when you were in primary school or have you ... friends now who weren't at the same school?
- P1: I've actually got one friend that goes here that's a good friend and all the rest are from different schools.
- R: So you do change who you actually relate to, don't you?
- P2: ... They're just one big group ... everybody has sort of split up now and then some people hang out with, there's three of us, and some people come hang out with us ... so it's constantly changing.
- Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M

Over the year, better relationships had formed as individuals moved in and out of the groups, which had become less exclusive for these girls from School A.

4.4.4 Relationships with Boys

These girls enjoyed platonic relationships with boys within their friendship groups. All groups of girls spoke about relationships with *guy friends* who were not boyfriends, and how they enjoyed conversation and discussion with them. The following interaction highlights this:

- P: ... quite a few guy friends and ... that sounds strange ...
- P: One of my guy friends, T, he lives in England ... we have strange conversations about music ... we get on okay... we're polar opposites ...
- P: ... one of my guy friends, R, I'm probably more close to him than when I'm in a relationship with a guy ...
- R: Because you've known each other for a long time?
- P: We only met this year.
- R: But you clicked?
- P: ... the guys I was close to from primary school, I'm not as close with him.

- P: We went on a holiday ... and ... I made ... a really good friend, and ... we have been keeping in touch by email, and my brother [said I was going] out with him just 'cause I email him ...
- R: Whereas you're just having conversation and enjoying his company?
- P: Yeah. And he's just saying that because he's ... younger than me.
- P: And that's one of the problems with having guy friends because when ... you talk to your friends about it, someone will walk past, overhear and say, 'Oh, you're going out with someone' ... it just seems that the boys and girls can't be friends ... they have to be going out ... or fancying each other.
- P: Yeah.
- P: ... they say 'Oh' if a boy's your friend then they go 'Oh, you get your boyfriend' ... I can get on with boys and stuff without having to go out with them.
- Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

Having a friendship with a boy was different to going out with a boy, and this sometimes created conflict. The girls felt able to be close to boys and identified boys as friends who they enjoyed having conversation with and felt that others did not see it the same way. They also talked about friends of varying ages, who they sometimes met because of shared interests or activities, as the following excerpt shows:

- R: How many of you ... have friends that are much older than you?
- P: Some.
- R: Where do you meet them?
- P: I just meet them through other people, like other friends ... and relatives ...
- R: Is the relationship different between someone who's older than you ... and someone who's in Year 7 as well?
- P: Not really.
- P: What I do ... when I hang out with the older friends is a lot different to what I do with Year 7, because in Year 7 you just ... stand around and talk, but you find with the old people ... we don't do the same thing.
- P: I've got some friends in Year 9 that I've known... from the band.
- R: And ... you've got a commonality in that ... you're all in the band?
- P: Yeah.
- R: Do you talk to them at school?
- P: ...one of my friends from band actually came, was walking past and said hello.
- P: ... they were online so it's cyber friends and I don't know if they're real ... I've got 14-year-old friends ... two of my good friends they're both my age, one's a little older and one's a little bit younger. But yeah, I've got people in Portugal, America, England ...
- P: ... my best, best friend, she is a year younger than me, but we meet through pony club and her dad and my dad and stuff, and ... it doesn't really matter that she's a

year younger than me, we have that much in common and stuff ... But ... I want her to be in Year 7 and then it would be a much easier ...

R: So she's still in Year 6?

P: Yeah.

P: ... one of my friends she's 14, but we've known each other since we were like three ... we've known each other our whole lives, and we are really still really good friends, and then she has a friend who's 15 and I'm really good friends with her.

R: So what do you talk about?

P: Well they have horses, and we like talking about their horses and riding and stuff, all together.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

R: Have you got friends ... who are older than you?

P2: Yeah, I've got a few friends in Year 11. My friend that just left school last year [she was in] Year 11 ...

Interview, School B, Year 7/8, J&L

In both focus groups and the interviews, these girls talked about friends of different ages, some of whom had been part of the lives for most of their lives. They found the friendships with older peers stimulating because the friendship developed through shared interests outside of school, such as horse riding and band.

4.4.5 Friends with Similar Ability

There was mention of having friends of various ability levels but of the need sometimes to adjust one's behaviour to fit in with the group. This was not a major issue in the conversation but it was obvious when it came up that all girls were familiar with this need to be different as the following excerpts show:

R: Do people know you're smart?

P: Probably not ...

P: No, everyone reckons I'm angry.

P: They are actually surprised that I'm in a top class, so ...

R: So do you choose not to show that you're smart sometimes?

P: No. Well it depends. I don't know.

R: Do you sometimes pretend that you're not as smart as you are?

P: ... when it comes to things and people like, you don't want to stand out.

P: I don't know why but sometimes ... I do act like really dumb. I don't know why.

P: Just like some people like to act like blonde, you know, like ...

- P: Stereotypical blonde.
- P: ... I don't really want to stand out in the crowd ... being smart, I just like being with my friends. And I like being the same as my friends.
- R: ... so are your friends the same level of smartness as you, or are they more or less smart than you?
- P: Some of them are a bit less than me and most of them are like me.
- R: Do you choose your friends because of that?
- P: No [chorus response from members of group].
- R: How do you choose your friends?
- P: Some of my friends, when some of them are really smart some others are ... lost most of the time ... people don't really tend to notice that ... half of my friends are in my class ... the rest are in all separate classes and mixed up ...
- R: So you get together at morning tea time and recess but it doesn't matter?
- P: In class, I'm with most of them anyway.
- P: I don't think it makes any difference, how smart or dumb your friends are. Because ... the smartest person could be ... the meanest person and ... the person that's ... lowest in the class could be ... the person that'll be your best friend, so it doesn't really make any difference.
- P: You don't really choose your friends. You are sometimes stuck with them. Like how I met S was through other friends ... you don't really exactly choose your friends ... sometimes they just appear and you're stuck.
- P: In primary school, people used to call me tomboy just because I used to always play with the boys and I'd played football and now I can't ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

- P: ... the nerds but people don't really like them because they're not popular ...
- P: Smart people aren't always that popular, because ... they're smart but they don't have any friends so they hang out with you ...
- R: ... does she think that if she acted smart she wouldn't be as popular ...?
- P: Yeah.
- P: And then the other girl ... she's like really smart ... and she's friends with them except she doesn't exactly really like them that much

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

Not only had the girls noticed differences in the way friendships work in high school, they also were aware of the impact of ability on relationships, and of the way that they adjusted themselves to be part of the group. At this point, this did not seem to be at great expense to their confidence, and as a deliberate act, it remained their choice of behaviour.

There was considerable acknowledgement that there were expectations from the peer group around behaviour and responses critical of anyone who was different. Other girls were labelled *goths or emos*, labels used to describe appearance but also linked to ability as the following interaction shows:

R: How do other people view you?

P: 'Cause I wear eyeliner people label me as an emo or a goth and that kind of pisses me off.

P: ... not goths. Just because they like the colour black and dark colours.

R: ... so are emo people, intelligent people?

P: Mostly they just hide it.

R: How do people know that you're smart?

P: Glasses. Everyone thinks that if you have glasses, you're like smart.

R: But all of you don't have glasses?

P: we do ... bar P ...

P: But they're reading glasses.

P: ... you can't really judge people from being smart just from their appearance ...

P: ... they can ... have blonde hair and look real plastic, and they can be ... really smart.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

This conversation identified a number of ways that those who were perceived as different were labelled by the peer group, and how such comments could, by inference, place those who demonstrated ability into the group of 'odd' people. The girls were aware that appearance did not necessarily reflect ability. They identified that being smart did not equate to being popular.

The movie 'Mean Girls' was discussed as an example of the way girls treated each other, and as these excerpts show, these girls did not always find it appropriate:

R: I was watching a television show last week where they were talking about the way girls bitch about each other ... is that true?

P: Yes.

P: ... that movie, 'Mean Girls', is basically what relationships with girls is all about. It's not quite as bad here, 'cause the principals get involved.

P: ... it's just an over-exaggerated version ...

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

P3: 'Mean Girls', the movie's set around stereotypes... the smart maths people, and ... the ditzy girls and the jocks ... but the new girl's in ... most of them ...

R: She has to find a way in doesn't she? ...work out where she fits ...

P4: It's ... what you said... they make it, a stereotypic thingy where they just ... upset each other.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

The tension between girls was described in the focus groups as stereotypical, although exaggerated in popular culture. Conflict between girls was also discussed in the interviews and mentioned in some journals, as shown below:

P1: ... mostly with guys that just, they get over it, with a slap on the back and get over it.

P1: But the girls hold grudges and get nasty ...

P2: ... that could be how ...our big group got separated ... into two different groups.

P1: Just disagreements and it ... and gets nasty after a while.

P1: Friends against friends.

R: And, and what do you do then? ...

P1: I try and back out of it, or try and get them to see eye-to-eye.

R: ... so you're a mediator, in other words? You're trying to ...

P1: Stop it.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

R: ... your friends, have they changed since last year?

P: ... a few of them have. A few of them aren't the same as they were last year.

R: So have you lost any good friends in the changes that have happened?

P: I think a few of them ... the new friends that I made last year [and] ... friends that I had before ... because I am good friends with them that I would only ... be on their side and stuff. I hate choosing sides so sometimes I just go, 'I hate you' over the phone.

R: So you feel that you're a bit in the middle sometimes?

P: Yes.

R: Is that because ... you're not taking on sides?

P: No, I don't really go on sides unless something really, really happens and they start getting me into the fight and stuff. So I just don't really like it when they try and make me choose sides and stuff.

P: There's lots of physical fights between the girls and ... the lower classes, but I think because the girls in the higher classes know better words ... They tend to use that without actually physically fighting .

Interview, C, School B, Year 7/8

P: I think that sometimes girls can be a lot more judgemental and especially adolescent girls can be very judgemental and ... guys ... don't really care as much and so it's ... good to have guys in there, just to throw them in the mix so it's sort of settles within the middle.

Interview, School B Year 7/8, E&R

14/5: I wonder what triggers anger in girls because some get angry as soon as you say something and others take a while to finally snap.

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7D

For C, the tension between girls was stressful and she found herself sometimes caught between groups. It is clear that participant B7D had experienced some peer anger and was left wondering what created such strong feelings. Words such as *judgmental*, *grudges*, and *get nasty* highlight the strong feelings and the conflicts that emerged as girls negotiated the social environment of early high school, where friendships were described as fluid, with groups that formed and changed. The girls had noticed a difference between the way these conflicts developed with different groups. Despite the conflicts, most girls indicated that they felt their new friendships, and those that had continued, were good, and that they had strong relationships with their friends. The friendship group was clearly important to daily life, and there was frequent communication with these individuals using a range of media.

The girls considered that it was harder to be a gifted boy than a gifted girl, because boys were picked on by others and that they were more likely to misbehave in school settings, as described in these interactions:

R: So is it easier to be smart and a girl, or smart and a boy?

P: I reckon boys get put down more than girls do.

P: Yeah.

P: In the class some of the guys that I know that are ... pretty smart ... get picked on by the other boys ... calling them a nerd ... I don't get anything from anyone.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

R: Do smart people always make the right decisions?

P: No.

P: Some people ... [X] was like the smartest person in the world, and then ...

P: ... knowledge, that kind of knowledge is different to common sense ...

P: Your smartest person can have like no common sense at all.

- P: ... he was in our class last year, and he had like no common sense at all.
- P: But he was like a genius.
- P: ... a total genius.
- P: What I was meaning to say before was ... even the smartest people in the world make mistakes.
- P: Everyone does.
- R: But do you think that people expect that smart people won't make mistakes?
- P: Yes.
- P: Well, people would expect that it's not going to happen.
- P: Yeah, like they would ... be ... expecting them ...you'd just think they're smart so ... they'd be perfect and do everything right ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

From discussing how hard it is for boys to be identified as gifted, the girls explored how gifted people appeared to show less common sense than others, reaching the conclusion that common sense and giftedness are separate things and noting that others expect clever people to be sensible. While gifted people, particularly boys, were identified for their inappropriate behaviour, the expectation that those who were gifted would do the right thing was alluded to.

4.4.6 An Expectation of Performance

As the girls talked about giftedness, their lives and their experiences, it was clear that others around them held certain expectations for them as brighter students in school. They felt that more was expected of them in terms of being different from other students while at the same time they were expected to not make mistakes, have common sense and fit the stereotype of 'nerd' as portrayed in the media, as described in the comments below:

- P: They just go, 'The nerds all wear glasses' ...
- P: Yeah, they pull their pants up just here, and wear ... flannelettes or cardigans ... and then they've got the dumb blondes, that have ... huge boobs ...
- P: And blonde hair, and you know, 'Oh, I broke a nail' [voice and actions to highlight character].

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

The description of nerds was the caricature shown in various forms of popular culture. The stereotyping of both nerds and others was clear. The peer group had some impact

on how individuals felt about their ability, as the need to be part of the group takes precedence, as this interaction highlighted:

- P: Some people just don't (show) the smartness [laugh].
- P: It's like people think they're too cool to be smart ... in their groups ...
- P: They think ... they'll get teased and they won't be in that group anymore ...
- P: Or if they show that they are smart then the boys won't like them and they have to be cool all around the boys.
- R: So you don't think the boys like smart girls?
- P: No, not really.
- P: Not necessarily.
- P: Oh ... she's a geek.
- P: ... these days guys go for your attractiveness, how you look and stuff like that. That's why girls always like spend most time on the hair and stuff, makeup, and make themselves look plastic and stuff [laugh].

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

It was not only peers who placed expectations, whether about academic behaviours or social behaviours, on the girls. There were many expectations placed on the girls to perform well, both from teachers and from parents. As a response, the girls acknowledged that they did not always demonstrate their ability in school, with a range of reasons for hiding it described in these excerpts:

- P: I know someone who last year ... they were going to move because everyone knew and they were picking on him.
- R: Do you think that it's better to hide your ability at school?
- P: Possibly.
- P: Depends ...
- P: I don't think it is personally but some people think it is so they get accepted into groups and stuff. Because if they want to be popular in the popular group ... they think that they have to go worse at school like the ... girls or boys that are in the popular group ... some of them don't try very hard.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- R: What would make you go: I have to stop being me?
- P: Other people.
- P: Somebody ...
- P: ... judge you sort of thing. They judge you too harshly or something.
- P: Because people judge you on your looks.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: Mr M's funny.

P: ... teachers you don't like, the lessons just seem to drag and drag on ... teachers you do like, they make it fun. Like Miss D, she is a good teacher, she puts on an archaeology dig and all that.

P: She makes lessons fun so that students learn from the class and students want to learn and do as she says.

R: Do you think it's easier now to not do as well as what you could do because you have so many different teachers; you can be dumb in one class and clever in another one? ... at primary school your teacher knew how clever you were all the time?

P: Yeah. You had one teacher so she knew your expectations and she knew your levels of smartness and your levels of dumbness [laugh].

P: And how sporty you were and they like knew you ...

P: They knew your personality.

P: ... or if you were just a big, fat meany or something.

P: ... they knew ... if they put you in groups they knew who your friends were, so they would put them in your group so you would actually get along with people.

R: So they had a plan.

P: But then they'd know who you'd act well with.

P: Like good readers and good spellers and good, yeah.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: ... we were talking about how to enjoy your subjects ... but ... some subjects I don't enjoy ... I enjoy some of maths ... because that part of the maths I'm good at.

P: It depends what teachers you have as well. 'Cause like some teachers, like Mrs [X] is especially very nice, and then you have teachers like Mr [F].

P: Because if you like your teachers you tend to pay attention more and actually like the subject.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: ... people think just 'cause you're smart you hang out and it's like always serious but we sit there and we act like complete idiots, and then we write poems about how awesome we are and how much we hate our teacher and ...

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

The decision to hide ability or not was about fitting in with the popular group and conforming to the behaviour in class that was expected. This was a difference the girls noted between high school and primary school—where teachers knew the students better and so would have appropriate expectations for them. The different manner of the teacher evoked different levels of effort and performance.

4.4.7 A New Identity

Being recognised within this research project as gifted for the first time meant that some of the conversation was about coming to terms with a new identity. There was a need to reflect on experiences through the lens of this new label. Part of this involved looking at what the media presented as the way to be, and the types of personality that were portrayed as being the relevant ones. I asked the girls to imagine they were to create a character for popular culture media that positively demonstrated giftedness and to describe the character they would then present.

- R: Do you think if they were a sporty person as well as a clever person they would be more attractive to people watching a television show ...?
- P: Possibly.
- P: Depends who they were.
- P: Stereotyping people.
- P: Depends on what
- P: ... sport they would be.
- R: So it depends what people want, what they think is important ...
- P: So if they don't really do much and they don't socialise much they might think it's completely [wrong]. It's like that's sporty and that's smart ...

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: I reckon that it should be someone that's like normal and that looks normal, like normal person. You know what I mean? And just smart ...

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: Different and sort of be like every person though.
- P: Like not completely different from everyone else but still different and kind.
- R: Okay.
- P: I would also have them to have the knowledge of a normal person ... not to be super smart but ... have an average knowledge.
- P: We should say average instead of normal because no one's normal.
- R: But if they have an average level of knowledge are they smart?
- P: Yes.
- P: The average is smart because most people are smart. If you're like, if you've got a learning disability or something that makes you not as smart, but everyone is smart in their own way...

Focus group 3, School A. Year 7/8

P: I'd make it individual [everyone is an] individual yet they're still different ... they're still kind of normal ... they're different from everyone else ...

P: They've got an average mind.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: I would probably make some like P and just different in their own way.

R: So they would dress different or they would wear their hair different or something like that?

P: Just ... not completely different but have different likes and dislikes.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: I'd like my character to be like P actually.

P: She's different and she doesn't care what anyone thinks ... if somebody calls her names she won't react to it, she'll just like take it ...

P: She'll just ignore them, like I do.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: I'd make a person, like I'd like them to be kind-hearted and ... unique ... because I don't think it's right having two people trying to be the same as each other because you're who you are. I'd like them to be sporty because I'm sporty. I'd just like them to be happy with who they are.

R: Does being clever stop you being happy?

P: No.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: Like a nice person.

R: What do you mean by nice person?

P: Like didn't tease other people ...

P: And kind and considerate.

P: They ... help other people if they need help with a question and teacher's out of the room.

P: Individual sort of thing. Unlike everyone else I haven't really thought it through very well.

P: And different sort of thing. So still smart and ... kind.

R: How would you show that they were smart?

P: They're just smart and they don't really care about people thinking that they're smart.

P: Or a geek.

P: And the way they act, if like they don't act like Homer Simpson and they actually behave like Lisa.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

Couched in their experience, and based on the people they know, the girls' descriptions clearly indicated that they wanted someone gifted to be seen as 'normal'. Their list of characteristics demonstrated what could be described as accepted values but there was also a sense of the importance of being an individual, true to one's own values and confident to be that way. Having a sense of self appeared to be one of the most important values for these girls and was respected more than having only a focus on physical appearance or female helplessness, although there was some question around the idea that being smart meant you had to look like a nerd, highlighted in the following conversations:

P: I'm a girlie girl but I'm smart.

P: I'm saying that I don't like how people ... go ... 'Oh my God, I broke a nail. I got to go and get a manicure' like Paris Hilton and all that.

R: Okay. So that's what you call a girlie girl?

P: Yeah. The ones that wear the really, really miniskirts and get the manicure done every five seconds.

P: Well you can dress up and stuff but you can still be smart ... the way you dress and what you look like doesn't make your brain go any different.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

R: So are blonde people less bright?

P: No.

P: ... it's not because they're blonde though.

P: And it doesn't matter how you look, you can still be like smart or dumb.

P: ... 'cause C's really smart ... they go, 'Oh, you're a dumb blonde'.

P: And they call her a dumb blonde when she's like very smart ... everyone calls blondes dumb for some reason.

R: Do you think that's come from television?

P: Probably.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: ... being smart doesn't make you a better person, it just makes you smarter I guess.

P: Sometimes it makes you more likeable.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

Across both school settings there was a clear sense that, in the real world, appearance was not an indicator of your ability and that being gifted did not immediately make

you a good person. This contradicted the images that they saw in popular culture, where the emphasis was on physical appearance and following trends.

4.5 Giftedness in Popular Culture

4.5.1 Smart Stars

A central purpose of this research was to explore how popular culture, through its portrayal of intelligent women, either supported or disrupted the talent development of the girls participating in the research project. When asked if there were celebrities who were smart, the responses identified that the ‘smart’ ones were the ones who did not get caught up in the media pressure but rather the celebrities who stayed out of trouble and did their work, or who had a strong sense of individuality and creativity, as highlighted below:

R: Think about all the movie people, the television characters. Who are the smart ones?

P: The ones that you don’t see all the time.

P6: Because they’re not like Paris Hilton who likes getting into trouble all the time.

P4: ... because they are smart not to be out in the limelight, going out every day, buying dresses or doing something really embarrassing or drunk driving and getting drunk, partying late and everything.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

‘Smart’ stars were identified by the girls as those who did not get noticed for behaving inappropriately or whose lives were not covered widely by the media. The following conversation reinforced this perspective but also highlighted that the media played a part in telling the stories of stars, whether smart or not.

P7: Kirsten Dunst ...

P2: Yes, there was this page in this magazine that had all the smart people in it and she was one of them. I can’t remember all of them.

P5: I think Pink was. I think she is.

R: Why do you think Pink is? ...

P3: The way that she performed.

P7: It was on this TV show ... a music show on Austar... two hours of ... Pink ... her life and stuff. And she was really smart ...

R: So she was good at school and she was able to do things?

P7: Yeah.

P4: I reckon she's the sensible one because you don't really see her in magazines ... I look through my mum's magazine like 'Famous' and 'New Weekly' ... see her maybe once every two or three months, just like if she's going shopping ... or hanging out with her husband or ... rehearsing for shows ...

P6: Like Pink and other celebrities, nearly every magazine has got Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt about their marriage on it ... every magazine, that's all they have ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

Despite a magazine being identified as the agent for giving the stars a label of smart, those who did not appear in magazines were admired as being clever. Pink's ability to perform, as well as her life story, left the girls with admiration for her as a talented woman. Further discussion which centred on characters in popular culture, rather than the real people, gave an overall sense that smart people were represented in popular culture as the sidekick or the helper, rather than the main character. The excerpts that follow highlight this:

P1: Most of the time the person that's like the nerd is usually the smart one.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P2: ... 'cause you have like your hero kind of thing ... your main character, and he'll have some friend who's like a scientist ... he gives all the information ...

P2: ... there's that side person like the scientist who knows everything ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

P1: ... most of the time in movies they make it stereotypical. It's like the smart people are usually the nerds, at the bottom of the charts ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

Smart characters were not good looking or trendy and were constructed to be laughed at or to contrast with the sophistication of the main character. In particular, smart girls were constructed in movies to be a token different person, placed in the plot to represent a minority group just as there were often other minority groups included in a story, as described in the following conversation:

P: There's a girl who's the intelligent one and a brother or someone who's all weird ...

R: They create the contrast ...

P: ... in the cartoons ... they have like the smart ... there's ... the normal people and then there's the dumb idiotic people and then there's like one smart, standout smart A-grade student.

R: And what does that A-grade student look like?

P: Mostly have glasses and look like geeks.

- P: Millhouse isn't smart.
- P: The thing with this subject is that the way that they show ability is that mostly the girls are not really smart. like that show 'Wizards of Waverly Place'.
- P: The girl's really dumb and then her brother is really smart.
- R: So what does he look like when he's smart?
- P: He's just, he wears like really formal clothes.
- P: He wears like those button shirts ...
- P: And a vest.
- P: ... the ties and the vest.
- P: The opposite of natural things.
- P: It's like Cosmo and Wanda because like ...
- P: Cosmo's all silly and Wanda's all smart and realistic.
- P: And pink.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- S: I've seen a fair amount of movies that have had dorkier kind of girls, that are really smart and they like this guy that's popular and good looking ...

Interviews, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

Smart girls were not presented in visual media as socially acceptable. The emphasis on appearance and physical aspects of a person seemed to be more noticeable for females, with female bodies being used to please the audience visually, and to sell messages not related to their identity as described in the following comments:

- P: Just like 'Deal or No Deal' ... they're sort of using the female bodies to give out the cases, but ...
- R: Can you imagine if they would use men for those?
- P: I don't know. I don't think people would watch it if they used men ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

- P: ... advertising- the Coke Zero ad how it's sexist and racist and stuff.
- R: Tell us why.
- P: Well it's sort of sexist because it goes 'Do you want to break up with me?' 'Yeah, now' ... and there's like all these chicks with humungous boobs and then all these bras and not everyone is like that. And like all of these ...
- P: ... chicks and babes and stuff.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

- P: Popular culture, it reflects women looking good ... if they try and advertise something they usually use someone that doesn't necessarily have to be smart but looks good and skinny.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

In their conversations there was a focus on stereotyping around the physical appearance of women in media, although it was noted that boys were also presented in the stereotyped image of the geek, with glasses, poor dress sense and messy appearance. There was acknowledgement that there were some smart women presented in popular culture. These women had fewer friends in the movies or shows that the girls watched, and did not meet the normal social expectations for women. Smart people were not popular but rather were needed for certain roles and skills. When they did have a group of friends it was a group made of other outcasts or misfits. These points are present in the following conversations:

- R: Can you think about a female ... character that has been made up?
P2: Lisa [others nod and agree].
P4: I reckon Lisa because she's a know-it-all and studies a lot ...
R: But do you think that's a stereotype; do you see yourselves in Lisa?
P5: No.
P3: No.
P6: ... People start picking on her and stuff and that happens to me ...
P4: I can really relate to Lisa.
Focus group 2, School B, Year 7/8

Lisa Simpson was identified in both groups of Year 7/8 girls as the smart character in 'The Simpsons', and while they were amused by her behaviour, the sense that she was lonely and not popular was also clear. There were clear feelings about her portrayal as a gifted girl, as shown below:

- R: Why do you say she's intelligent?
P: 'Cause she's like getting all As in school, even though it's just a cartoon.
P: She's like us and we're cool.
P: And she's just a nerd ...
P: ... no friends.
R: So she has no friends ... why doesn't she have any friends?
P: Because she's the smartest and everyone else is quite dumb, really, compared to her.
P: She's trying to make friends with them but she doesn't really like them.
P: That's because it's not people of like mind. If you're smart, you'd go with smart people, 'cause if you talk ... intellectually, actually use big words ... they just go 'What are you talking about?'
P: And you hang with smart people ... at her school, other dudes, like the boys ...
R: And she doesn't talk to them?
P: Not really.

- R: Why do you think the people that constructed her as a character, why did they make her like that?
- P: Well they wanted to have a fat person, and ... a nagging person, and ... a bad boy, and ... one that just couldn't talk and one smart ass. So she's a smart ass 'cause she's almost too smart.
- R: Is she a smart ass or is she just smart?
- P: Smart.
- P: Smart.
- P: Smart.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

Lisa Simpson was identified as a caricature of clever girls because of her grades and her social status. While some personal connections are drawn, the girls noted that Lisa had *friends who she doesn't really like*, and she found it difficult to talk to others as they did not understand her vocabulary. They were able to identify with aspects of Lisa's life in terms of mixing with others. In one interview, when the participant revisited the overall summaries from the focus groups, there was further questioning about why intelligence was represented as it was and a more forthright criticism of how intelligence and women were represented. In the following excerpt, L voiced explicitly what had been alluded to in earlier conversation, identifying the contradictory way that men and women are represented, but she did not have reasons or explanations for it.

- P: Why is that such a negative thing, 'cause why does the man have to be the intelligent one?

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

This questioning was an indication there was some identification of conflicting images and roles in popular culture and real life. Further positive descriptions of the intelligent female character emerged over the focus groups and interviews. The participants were able to identify some clever female characters who were portrayed in a positive way and began to dissect the characters and identify aspects that made these smart female characters important within the storylines. In the following two excerpts, the girls are discussing two female characters present in popular television:

- R: Who is the most intelligent person on 'Bones' do you reckon?
- P: I reckon Bones.
- P: Bones.
- R: Why?

- P: Well because she's ...
- P: She's boring.
- P: Because she's the top of the rank and she's the boss and she goes right ...

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: He's not as smart as Abby. Abby's fairly smart.
- R: Why do you think they created Abby to look the way she does?
- P: Because she's a bit of a stereotype though.
- P: She looks like that anyway.
- P: ... she's got all tattoos ... She's one of those really hip people but she's really smart. I think it shows that even the people who look really cool and everything can still be really smart.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

While Abby (Abby Sciuto, played by Pauley Perrette in 'NCIS') is identified as clever and cool, the character Bones (Dr Temperance Brennan, played by Emily Deschanel in 'Bones'), is recognised as smart but not appealing. In both these cases, though, the smart character was able to think logically. The skill of logical thinking, allowing the individual to solve problems and bring together a number of issues that reached a conclusion, was attributed to the level of smartness of a person, as the following comments highlight:

- P: ... she's the one that goes 'that and that' and they all go, 'oh yeah' and they all come up with their little suggestions and then she goes 'right and then that and that and that', and then her assistant ... Booth ...
- P: ... he goes 'oh yeah'. And then he goes 'and what if this happens?' and she goes, 'yes, we've already worked that out, that and that ...' ...she's totally smart and the way she acts. And she's been to university ... when he hasn't.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: Abby.
- P: I like her.
- P: Even though she's the smartest in the group.
- R: How do you know?
- P: Because she's a scientist and she figures everything out ... she does the entire DNA scanning ...
- P: She's cool.
- P: In a different way.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

The connection between smart women and the sciences was identified. They noted that it was the character's willingness to undertake hard work and their determination that meant they were smart. Another character who attracted discussion was that of 'Hannah Montana' (Hannah Montana, played by Miley Cyrus, 'Hannah Montana: The Movie', 2009) who was seen as clever though not necessarily in schoolwork, and creative, as she used her talent with music to help her do better at school. This example is described here by a participant in the third focus group:

- P: I was thinking Miley, but she sort of is, but then not with all schoolwork.
- P: She's pretty good at schoolwork ... when it comes, in the TV show, when it comes to biology ... she can't do it. She gets like C's.
- P: ... then she makes a dance of it And she goes like the femur's connected to the whatever...
- R: ... so she uses her music to try and teach herself the boring stuff?
- P: Yeah ... the teacher thinks that she's making signals to her friends to get the answers ...

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

In contrast, and perhaps stereotypically, blonde women were often seen as dumb or ditzy, because, the girls concluded, males prefer women this way. There was a sense that people like dumb characters rather than brighter ones, thus the smart people were always nerds and the popular ones were the dumb people. As the girls spoke of this they were disparaging of the 'blonde' and the concept that blonde was equated with dumbness, but reinforced that this is the stereotype, as shown in these comments:

- P: I don't think they make smart people anymore, because in movies smart people are always nerds, and they have to make cool people, so they're always dumb. Like you have Cameron Diaz always plays [sic] like a dumb bimbo ...

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

- R: Are there characters on television that are blonde and dumb?
- P: But they're usually the ones who have dyed their hair blonde.
- R: So they've made themselves blonde ...
- P: ... [there is] that girl who always wears pink.
- P: 'Legally Blonde'?
- P: She's actually quite smart though.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

- P: Blondes are usually dumb.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

An interesting point made was that smart characters were portrayed as either an unpopular, odd character or they were someone who achieved success, evidenced by greater material gain, and that the benefit of being smart was the material gain. Such a view contrasts with the way that the girls had generally identified that being smart was not portrayed as a good thing.

P1: ... most of the time in movies they make it stereotypical. It's like the smart people are usually like the nerds, like at the bottom ... or they've got themselves a really good job and ... have massive mansions and massive cars ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

4.5.2 Constructing an Intelligent Character

Given the opportunity to create a character that represented intelligent girls for popular culture, the participants were able to articulate the type of person they perhaps saw themselves as. 'Normal' was a key term in this conversation across the groups and the features emphasised were physical and moral, rather than academic. The notion of being a problem solver was important and the need to be individual, someone able to resist being caught up in what everyone else was doing. The following excerpts show the ideas the groups had in response to the question that asked what this character would be like:

P: ... it should be someone normal ... without the glasses and ... doesn't look like a geek ... just be smart and use her intelligence in good ways, like sorting out difficult situations and stuff.

R: So solving problems and things. But what do you mean by normal?

P: Not stereotyped.

P: ... she should look normal ...

P: None of us look normal.

P: I'm just going to say something. Nobody's normal, so.

R: So when she said normal, what does normal mean?

P: ... someone that looks like here ... isn't stereotyped.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 7/8

P: Smart.

P: And they'd have to be tall, because who are not tall get picked on. And being tall would make them popular.

P: So basically like you?

P: Yep. Just basically me, cause I'm like mad.

P: ... like mine would kind of act like a cool person or something but also have brains to know like better than to shoplift ...

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

Many of their ideas appear stereotyped, based on current popular culture and their earlier comments, but connected to their own experiences and self-images.

4.6 Popular Culture and the Year 7/8 Case Study Group

4.6.1 The Place of Popular Culture in their Lives

Popular culture was an integral part of the lives of this group of Year 7/8 girls, in a conceptual way rather than as a clearly defined entity. They connected with it, and responded to it both actively by using the tools of popular culture to communicate with their peers, and more passively by watching or reading a range of sources. It provided conversation, models and challenges but it was largely for entertainment. They responded to it because it was there, something easily accessible, and a link to their peers. Knowing about the content of popular culture provided an entry into conversation and gave status. Without this knowledge, there was the risk of being isolated from social interaction in the playground.

There was a wariness in their conversation that suggested that there were risks to individuals as they interacted with popular culture in both physical ways and in areas of self-esteem, and there was concern that some girls were impacted by the messages in popular culture around physical appearance more markedly than others. Criticism of the content and the construction of popular culture images included the manipulation of images to present an acceptable look, the behaviour of those constructing the stories, and the use of images to show girls what they should be like. This was expressed often in our conversations. Self-esteem was potentially impacted on by the highly visible presence of celebrities in the lives of the participants. There was a sense that celebrities were not good examples to young girls and lived lives that were not admirable. However, even as the girls responded in this way, they believed some of the content and were convinced of the accuracy of the material.

Key concepts within popular culture that they responded to revolved around the lives of celebrities and the content of movies or television shows. While the girls recognised that the stories were often constructions, they also had an intimate view of the lives of celebrities and were both concerned and critical of the choices they made, feeling that they did not present the ideal lifestyle to their audiences. Sometimes they

did not clearly distinguish between the real person and the character played. Most of the girls acknowledged that they imitated fashion ideas, or aspects of personal appearance that were shown in the media, but they did not see these people as their role models. Popular culture for these rural adolescent gifted girls was closely connected to these celebrities.

When asked about the images of intelligence or giftedness present in popular culture, it was the way that celebrities made choices that indicated their 'smartness'. Celebrities who managed to avoid being in the press on a regular basis, or who were recognised for excellent performances in their field, were the stars the girls defined as clever. Within popular culture, the fictional characters representing intelligent girls were often the loners, or the 'odd' character who was the sidekick. Alternatively, they were the person able to solve problems and resolve issues. Lisa Simpson ('The Simpsons', 1989-) was consistently identified as gifted by the girls, and while they noted some resemblances to themselves they also noted strongly that she did not have friends or invite interactions by her manner and approach. Other smart characters were found in murder or investigation shows, where the intelligent female was well versed in science and problem solving and displayed determination and confidence in her ability to do her work. While the clever character may be the highest achiever in the end, they seemed often to be included as token, a character important to the resolution of the plot, but not the star.

The interactive forms of popular culture used by these girls included mobile phones and social networking, and these were seen as different to the more traditional forms of popular culture such as television. Being able to interact with the medium, rather than passively observing it, may have made it more appealing to the girls as they could assert themselves and their personalities as part of the interaction. These interactive tools extended the opportunities for relationships and brought greater connections between their immediate friends as well as others who were not geographically accessible. These girls were not avid users of websites set up especially for girls, and mainly communicated online as an addition to face-to-face communication in the same way that, historically, teenagers used the telephone.

Popular culture had considerable power over these girls, even as they felt they could be independent and not influenced by its images and content. Its very presence in their lives so regularly, and its capacity to connect them with the somewhat exotic world of celebrity, provided them with a different view of the world. It was a world they could both see through and connect to. The message it communicated about being gifted was not as clear as the message given about how to look and what to wear. The girls' conversations provided evidence that the clearer message they received through popular culture was one of the need to build an identity that fitted with the peer group and reflected the information provided through popular culture. A final quote from an interview discussion closes this section and sums up what these girls felt about the purposes of popular culture:

R: popular culture is based around how you look, whether it be makeup ...your face and your hair, or how slim you are ... It doesn't really go towards people who're either intelligent or dumb.

Interview, School A, Year 7/8, L&S

4.6.2 Popular Culture, the Peer Group and Identity

The girls responded to popular culture in terms of their sense of self, comparing themselves to examples provided within the various sources with which they interacted. Personal identity and the demonstration of individual preferences and style were informed by both mediated popular culture and by the peer group. Media influenced some choices, by providing models of behaviour and apparel that could be either ignored or imitated. Comments such as those below demonstrate that when the girls made choices, they felt they were able to pick and choose what they did in responses to the messages in popular culture or from their peer group.

P1: ... everyone was wearing those Volleys last year and now they are wearing Ravens but I don't because I make my own choices.

P2: I don't necessarily do stuff ... if I see something that I really want to do and it's in ... I really want to ... but sometimes things are in and I don't really want to do them so I don't.

P1: ... you've got to wear certain stuff or do certain things to be in the cool group and some people ...want to be cool.

P2: ... some people just do those things coz they want to look cool and stuff ... they dress up and put (no offense to anyone who wears eyeliner and mascara) but some people put it on so heavy that they just look horrible and they look disgusting.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

However, making choices also placed some of the girls in difficult situations where they felt that they were not ‘in sync’ with the peer group, and this felt awkward. These feelings were not expressed in the focus groups or interviews, but were found in some of the journals.

I am so sick and tired of being pushed around by everyone. My old/new friends, my teachers and my parents ... It's like everyone is against me for being me. I hate it and can't handle it any more ... I'm so annoyed, frustrated, cranky, angry, revengeful and I feel like I'm gonna explode. I hate my relationships with people.

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7C

These Year 7/8 girls, during their first year in secondary school, sometimes felt confident to make their own choices despite pressure to follow the trends but at other times felt distressed by the pressure to fit in. It was not clear if the ideas for what to wear or do came only from mediated popular culture or from peer group culture, but it was clear that others within the peer group created guidelines for choices about appearance, as shown in these comments:

- P: ... before people would say ... I'm not your friend anymore if you don't have that, but now it doesn't really matter.
- R: ... so you don't feel like you're a dag or something like that?
- P: No sometimes I do ... I just don't like Ravens.
- P1: Coz I see my neighbour and I see older girls wearing headbands and ... I go that must be in right now and I just wear it ...
- P2: ... one person gets it and then another person gets them and then someone else has them and other people get them and say they must be in and then others get it and then other people see them ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

Exclusion is a major part of life and friendship groups.
Journal entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7F

The impact of the peer group to include or exclude individuals based on their choices appeared to have more impact on these girls than choices informed by popular culture, although these participants continued to have a sense of self and to be able to choose which trends to follow. P1 used her older peers as her guide and followed their lead in terms of choices. P2 had noticed the process of an item becoming popular within the group but a later comment also indicated that the media had an impact on what they chose to like:

- P2: ... we're all the same age and stuff and we ... all listen to the music on the charts coz that is what is advertised on 'Video Hits'.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

Wearing what was shown in popular culture created positive feelings (*it's nice to have stuff like that, I guess and ... it makes you feel better*, Interview, School A, Year 7/8, S&M) of esteem and belonging for girls. Sometimes, though, using popular culture as a guide for choices in clothing or outfits actually caused some girls to feel isolated from the group, when they had misread the popular choices, as indicated by the following comment by P1 in a focus group:

P1: ...with 'Rage', I sometimes watch ... and ... they are wearing [a] bikini, just like swimwear ... to advertise something and you think, 'Oh, I'd really want that coz that would suit me' ... you buy it and ... wear it down to the pool, and there's these group ... and they say, 'That is so uncool, that is totally yesterday, you're not cool, so get away from here, this is our spot'.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

For P1, choosing an outfit that she saw on television caused her to be rejected and she noticed that the peer group could criticise choices in ways that damaged self-esteem, even when an individual has made choices based on information presented on television. The peer group provided information as well about appearance and behaviour, sometimes taking their lead from popular culture and creating trends within the context. One of the changes noticed in the Year 7/8 girls in the time between the focus groups and the interviews was in their responses to the influences of others on the choices they made. During the focus groups the need for individuality was commented on a number of times, as demonstrated in these excerpts:

P: ... I don't like people telling me what to do coz I like to do what I want to do ...

P: There's too many people ... who want to be like everyone else ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 7/8

Later when I met with the girls for the interviews, there had been a change in response to the influence of the peer group as is evident in this interaction, which began with my response to the shoes P1 was wearing in the interview:

R: ... those shoes ... I don't know that you would have bought them last year.

P1: Well, yeah, I did.

R: ... what would influence you to say, 'No, no. I want to be like everybody else now'.

P1: I started to care more about my appearance, 'cause last year I had these really ugly shoes and some people might think these are ugly, but ... most people have them ...

R: ... so you've just become a bit more conscious of what other people say about you
...

P1: Yeah.

P2: Last year, I used to have my hair tied back in a really tight ponytail ... and I look back and ... 'Oh God, I can't believe I did that'. And I'm happy with the way I am now ... compared to last year. I'm much happier ...

Interview, School B, Year 7/8, J&L

When we first met, the girls had strongly expressed their individuality and their right to choose, but eight months later, it was important to respond to the perceived comments of others and to adjust one's physical identity to fit in. Observations of the participants at this time also reflected a change in their physical appearance, with an increased use of makeup and more similarity in hair styles, accessories and general appearance, as noted previously with B7B's journal entries. They felt differently about themselves.

4.6.3 The Connection between Beauty and Popularity

A strong media message to these girls was that everyone needs to be beautiful, and being beautiful meant being thin, wearing makeup and having good skin. Having academic knowledge did not stop people acting with a trend or feeling that they needed to look a certain way, as these comments showed:

R: Who decides what's beautiful?

P1: Me.

R: How do you know...?

P2: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

P3: It means that someone who thinks someone's pretty, it doesn't mean they are, but if they think they are then they can think that.

P2: ... nowadays if ... you want to be like a model and ... you're beautiful and skinny ... you go and you're a model ... then you don't actually make the decisions of what you're wearing, what your makeup's going to be, what your hairstyle, the colour of your hair ... the makeup artist ... does it for you so and you don't have really much control over your body.

R: What makes you think that?

P4: ... with magazines and things people think you have to be perfect ... your face ... have to have no pimples ...

P2: Here is an example ... this little girl and ... no one would call her tubby ... but she reckons she is and she doesn't eat and she wants to be like Jennifer Love Hewitt or someone so ... uses Proactive and puts on tons of makeup ... puts on tons of music and puts on the undershirts and uses all her money ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 7/8

The concept of what looks right had been clearly described for the girls in popular culture. Jennifer Love Hewitt was used by a cosmetic company to advertise their skin products. The message received by the girls from this campaign is that she was a model of beauty. This discussion indicated how the girls felt that information about appearance came from popular culture, and that using makeup and skin care products was essential to ensure a girl looked perfect. The image presented was more important than the person. A contradiction between authentic self and the mediated self was displayed in popular culture, in movies such as ‘Hannah Montana’, where the plot is about the lead character’s identity crisis as described in this interaction:

R: So do you think ... they’re trying to make you think that she doesn’t know who she is?

P: Yep.

R: And so is the movie about identity, about her working out who she is?

P: Yeah.

P: But she doesn’t really do it in the end.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 7/8

Awareness of this contradiction was evident in the conversation with the girls during the focus groups, and while they eschewed the impact in early 2009, by the time they were interviewed in 2010 it was clear that some had become more prepared to follow the popular line and not insist as strongly on being an individual, making choices about appearance to align with what was demonstrated in the media and by their peers.

Many movies and television shows watched by the girls were set in a school or teenage environment (‘Mean Girls’, 2004; ‘That’s So Raven’, 2003-2007; ‘Super Sweet 16: The Movie’, 2007; ‘Gossip Girl’, 2007; ‘Home and Away’, 1988- ; ‘Hannah Montana’, 2006; ‘The Simpsons’, 1989-). In these shows, the ‘rules’ for popularity were set by groups or individual characters and adhering to them was usually the key to social success. Scenes show girls feeling pressure to conform to the rules for appearance and behaviour as dictated by the popular group. For the girls in this research, there were different viewpoints that reflected where individuals stood in the social setting in the school or how they felt about being part of the group or not. Those who were more confident were able to talk positively about not having to comply, but others, while making the stance, were less confident in their place. Focus

group members did not all belong to the same social group within their school and at each school there was one girl who belonged to the ‘popular group’ and was not in any of the friendship groups with the other girls. At School B, the girls talked openly about this popular group—the ‘plastics’. The term ‘plastics’ was derived from the movie, ‘Mean Girls’ (2004), and described a group of girls who identified themselves as the popular girls and who were focused on appearance, makeup and attracting boys. At School A, the term had been appropriated to describe some of the groups of girls, and in this excerpt P1 described her response to the way the other girls used it:

P1: ... we had our own group at school and by other girls in my year, we got called ‘plastics’ and stuff, just because we hung with the boys and they just assumed us as the popular girls and they went around calling us ‘plastics’

Focus group 2, School A, Year 7/8

This girl sat on the edge of the group each time she attended, and while interested in the research as evidenced by her joining the focus groups, did not consistently contribute in the ongoing focus groups, hand in her journal or accept the invitation for interview. In the focus groups, there was one girl at each school who identified with the ‘plastics’ and as such, mixed with a different group of girls than others in the research groups. While successfully achieving at school, these individuals also were conscious of the right way to look and behave to fit into this ‘popular’ group. The other girls in the focus groups identified themselves as ‘not the popular girls’, girls who did not meet the rules of physical appearance, were not able to spend as much time outside the home as others and were not as *into boys* as the popular girls in their school. By the time they were interviewed eight months later, there was a clear change in the physical appearance of some, with makeup, new hair styles and trendy shoes, a change that represented a greater need for them to be part of the group (*And I’m happy with the way I am now and stuff compared to last year*, Interview, School B, Year 7/8, J&L).

4.6.4 Response to the Research Project

Being involved in the research provided the girls with an opportunity to meet and connect with others who were identified as being their intellectual peers. It also provided an opportunity for the girls to express their thinking about themselves. Some of the girls demonstrated the capacity to think deeply about their beliefs, identities and

futures in their journals and expressed these in much more detail than in the focus groups:

I don't know what I would do or who I'd be without dance ... I have been dancing since Year 2 ... I love it so much and it's part of me now ...

Journal entry, School B, Year 7/8, B7F

I believe that you need to follow your dreams, believe in yourself and never let people stop you from being who you are and what you want to be. Don't try and pretend to be someone you're not, you should like yourself the way you are. And don't let yourself be reassured into something you don't want to do because trust me it's not worth it. I know from past experience what it's like to be pressured into something you don't want to do, in my case I didn't want to be uncool so I did what my friends wanted me to do. Now I regret it so much. What I'm trying to say is to stick up for yourself and don't be ashamed of who you are whether you're poor, smart, have trouble with learning, unpopular, have a disability, whatever the reason. And don't be pressured by other people.

Journal entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7D

Not only did this participant write fluently about her personal beliefs, she also expressed her aspirations clearly:

I love animals and the environment. When I grow up I hope to have a job that will surround me with animals and their habitats. Animals fascinate me, each species has its own way of speaking and each one keeps nature in balance. Animals are something we need to look after and care for, not cut down their habitats ...

Journal entry, School A, Year 7/8, A7D

Seeing a future, and showing concern for the current situation, as these girls express, are indicators of their capacity for deep thinking and analysis.

Over the period of the research, one participant (B7B) showed through her journal entries that her thinking had changed. The entries are listed in chronological order though they were not dated in the journal:

I love circus ... it's so fun and I think everyone should have a go. I don't like aerials coz I'm scared of heights but I love acrobats and that sorta stuff on the ground ... [later entry on same page] ... circus is really boring now and I never go ...

My next three weekends are taken up by parties! They are all in a row, I need a break lol but I will have loads of fun ...

Circus is so boring ... I haven't gone for a whole term and I really can't wait for the new Dolly and I just bought a Pandora bracelet ... it is so pretty.

Journal entries, School B, Year 7/8, B7B

These entries coincided with a change in manner and appearance over the course of the research for this participant, who began in Year 7 as a quiet, awkward girl who

was very definite about not getting caught up in the trends. By the time the research finished in Year 8, she arrived wearing ‘trendy’ shoes, with a greater sense of how to wear her hair and makeup to fit in. She was less outspoken about being an individual and showed greater concern about what others thought.

4.7 Summary of Findings

4.7.1 Responses to Popular Culture

Gifted girls in regional New South Wales, Australia, in Year 7/8, at the beginning of their high school career, lived immersed in a world of popular culture, interacting with it through three main sources of media: visual, including television and movies; print, including magazines; and online, including virtual communication tools. The girls were audience, contributor and critic. Popular culture informed their conversations and their decisions, and it provided them with information and instruction, as well as with a connection to their peers and families. As participants in the interactions with popular culture tools, they saw advantages in being able to connect with others, to know what was happening in the lives of celebrities and to compare their own experiences with these lives. As audience, they were not always able to separate the truth from the fiction. As critics, they were able to question the construction of the images and messages they saw, commenting on the ways that information was gathered and put together for audience consumption. Despite this capacity to critique popular culture, the girls continued to respond to the messages popular culture gave them, and were influenced by the trends that were demonstrated, whether the popular culture tool was visual media, print media or interactive online media.

These gifted girls had four core responses to popular culture that were evident consistently in the data across the sources. The first was simply to respond to the content as information that then became central to their conversations. There was a large amount of shared knowledge about the content of television shows, movies, magazines and music. This highlighted how closely they followed the fictional stories presented to them in the media. Secondly, they talked about the people they watched and related to in the media. A third core response emerged when the girls spent considerable time commenting critically on the media, its construction and presentation of general information, as well as information about celebrities and their lives. Finally, when prompted, they could describe the features of a character they would create to represent gifted people in popular culture, although they did not feel that such a character would be engaging for the audience.

Year 7/8 gifted girls did not see images of themselves in popular culture. Celebrities were key characters in the media and those identified as key figures were chosen because of physical appearance or success, often having personal difficulties with coping with the pressure and lifestyle. Within the content of popular culture, fictional characters portrayed a stereotype of giftedness: nerdy, poorly dressed, not socially popular, or quirky. The characters frequently provided a comic element or were problem solvers, playing supportive roles to the more socially acceptable popular character.

4.7.2 Giftedness

For most of these girls the label of giftedness was a new concept, and they identified that involvement in this project had caused them to think differently about their relationships and their capacities. Overall they felt that giftedness was about having natural ability that meant they were able to do things with greater ease.

They had recognised within themselves that they were different, without having the formal label in school. They felt that they had a different view on school than others, and that they had dreams and visions that went beyond their current context. In school, they had an amount of freedom in class, as long as their work was finished. They undertook a number of activities to entertain themselves while in class, and felt that their teachers did not really care, as long as the work was done. Teachers acknowledged their ability to do well in academic activities although did not provide them with any differentiated content other than to work faster and get through more content. There was a sense of power in knowing that teachers knew this, and in being able to be less engaged in the work, while continuing to do well. School work was not difficult or challenging, and did not require them to work very hard.

School was sometimes boring, but the girls seemed to have less conflict with teachers than other students in their cohort. In the past, they had been given opportunities for extended activities which they had taken up without realising why they had been offered to them. Opportunities continued to be available for them to choose although they did not necessarily take them up. For some, their giftedness meant there was pressure to be able to learn quickly and not need help, and this was something that concerned them. However, they had always enjoyed a sense of individuality within

the school setting. They had connected with friends from a range of ages, both male and female, who had similar levels of conversation, interests and skills.

An amount of time at school was about the social side. Friendships were changing for these girls as they entered high school where classes were grouped by ability. For some this meant for the first time they were alone in a new group of peers. New relationships sometimes impacted on existing ones. There was a greater chance to find friends who were of like mind, reducing the pressure to adjust one's behaviour to the group. All the girls talked about the fact that they enjoyed the company of boys in an intellectual way, and they also enjoyed the company of older friends. They did not like the way that girls treated each other.

The girls recognised that being gifted did not equate to being popular unless one was prepared to adjust one's behaviour to that of the rest of the group. Seeing themselves with a new identity, and adapting their self-image to accommodate this new identity was challenging because they also needed to adjust their understandings of what giftedness meant. Many of these girls had downplayed their ability and thinking to fit in with their group of friends and were prepared to continue to do this. While the term 'nerd' emerged in conversation, the girls played with the concept of giftedness and defined it as a capacity to cope with academic work, to think differently and to be able to move through school with ease.

4.7.3 Popular Culture and the Development of Talent

The concept of giftedness is about potential, while talent is defined by Gagné (2008) as the manifestation of potential into a valued skill set that is recognised in society. Popular culture, as a source of information for adolescent girls seeking to discover their identity, presents strong images that impact on their thinking. Through the conversations with the participants in the Year 7/8 case study group the girls expressed that, in popular culture, giftedness was something to be laughed at. Characters presented as gifted were often a comical characters who provided answers or solved problems but did not fit in with everyone else. Women who were gifted were not popular, were not beautiful in the stereotypical way and were often lonely, although they were useful in fixing things. While girls were seen participating in

education, including areas of science, this was seen as secondary to finding a man and achieving success through meeting expectations for physical appearance and clothing. The message from popular culture for these girls was that meeting social expectations of appearance, focusing on relationships and social activity, and not taking education seriously, was the way to 'be' for girls.

These girls lived in a regional area, within a community where they had long connections with each other. They did not feel this was a deficit, but identified that they were different to urban counterparts. They felt that being gifted afforded greater opportunities in life and more options in terms of their future. Having recently been labelled, they were sometimes struggling with a new vision of themselves, and not fully aware of what this might mean for them in terms of school expectation and parental expectation. They were proud of themselves and initially strongly committed to being individual and maintaining their own stance. Over the twelve months of the data collection they became less strident in their advocacy for being an individual and recognised in themselves that they were more influenced by those around them by the middle of their time in Year 8.

4.7.4 Conclusion

In Year 7/8, gifted girls responded to popular culture in a somewhat contradictory way, concerned at the manipulation evident to ensure that images present an ideal, but fascinated by the lives they were made part of, both fictional and non-fictional. Through conversation they were able to identify that the gifted are not always truthfully shown in fictional media, and that success was portrayed as relying heavily on physical appearance and clothing. Popular culture provided them with a perspective on giftedness that contradicted their need to be popular and to fit in. Over the course of the data gathering there was a clear shift from confidently standing out to feeling that, at least in terms of physical appearance, it was more important to follow the lead of everyone else than to ignore the messages given. There was also an acceptance that being identified as gifted presented some problems to address as well as a new sense of self and identity.

Chapter 5: Results Year 10/11 Case Study

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents the data gained from the Year 10/11 gifted girls, describing key themes that emerged in their conversations over the period of data collection, including the focus groups, journal entries and interview conversations. Figure 5.1 (on the following page) maps the structure of the chapter. A description of this group of Year 10/11 girls will be provided, followed by an analysis of the conversations and reflections undertaken during data collection. The chapter will finally present a comparison of the two age cohorts of participants, reporting on alignment between the Year 7/8 responses and the Year 10/11 responses, and highlighting where the age difference had an evident impact. This will be followed by Chapter 6 where a full discussion of all findings in the light of the literature will be presented.

5.2 Year 10/11 Girls: A Case Study

5.2.1 Profiles

Twenty girls in Year 10 consented to participate in the research project with 12 attending School A and eight attending School B. Their mean age in July 2009, was 15.17 years. Over the course of the data collection, the 12 girls from School A consistently attended the focus groups and activities, whereas only six of the girls from School B continued to engage with the project over the two years. When the girls self-nominated for the interviews in the second phase of data collection, four girls (66%) from School B attended an interview, while four from School A initially nominated, and a further three joined in one of the interviews (58%). This had an impact on the conversation but indicated their interest in being heard.

In the first focus group, participants completed a reflective task, listing their goals for the future and then placing these various activities on a timeline to indicate their vision of how they would achieve the goals. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide a summary of this information. After the second focus group, in a short meeting, eighteen of the girls completed a profile survey (for an example of the form see Appendix 6), providing information about their family, their preferences and their activities outside of school. The full summary of this information can be found in Appendix 15 (Table 1).

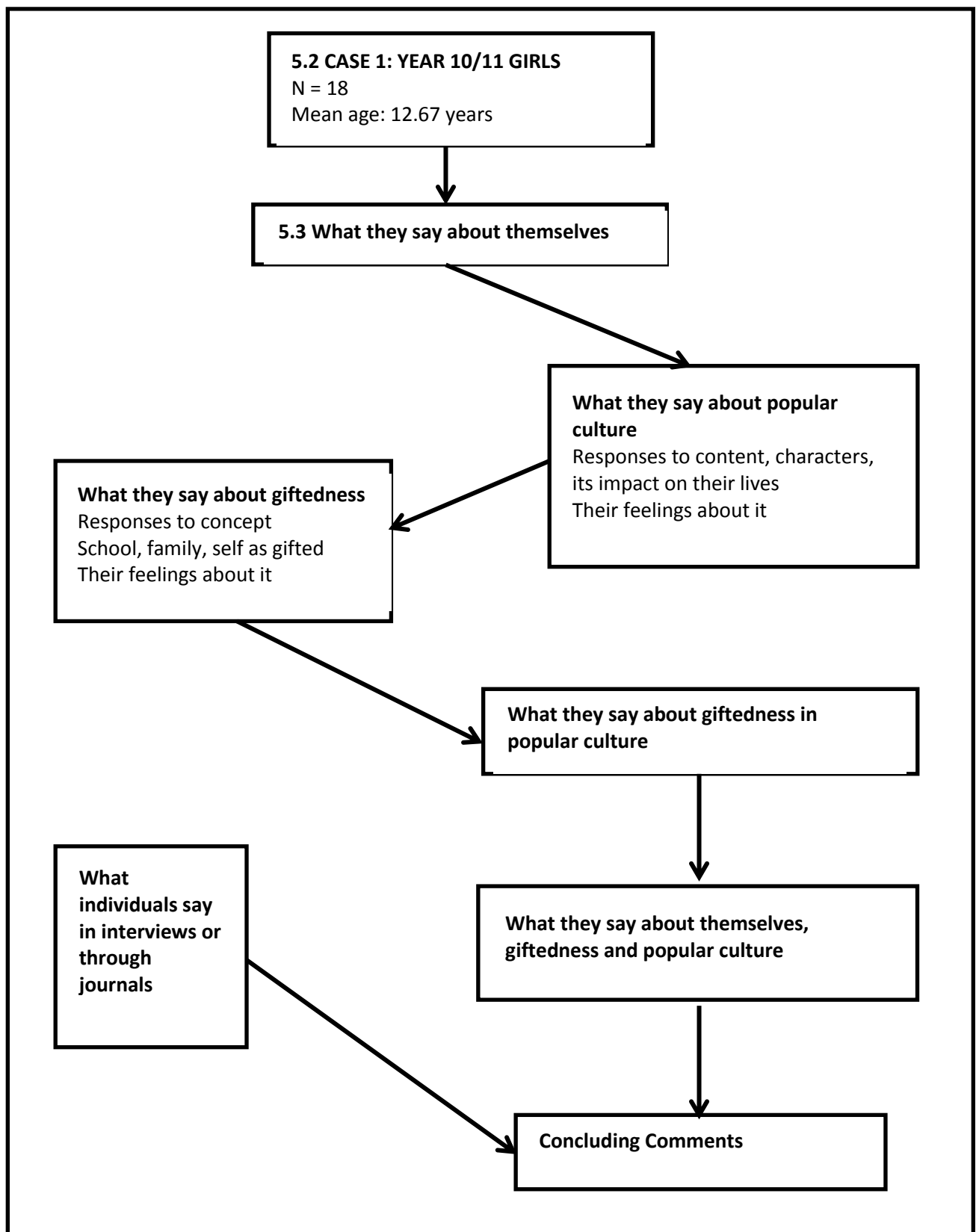


Figure 5.1: Outline of Chapter 5

Table 5.1: When will I achieve my goals?

Participant	Before turning 20	20-30	30-40	40+ years of age
A10	16 Travel 17 Get car 18 Start uni, 18 Get job	20s Get job		
B10	Uni	25 Travel 26 Meet Johnny Depp 26 Find my dream job 28 Have a family		
C10	18 Road trip 20 Write book	25 Preschool teacher	30 Travel everywhere	40 Photograph a lion 50 Charity work
D10		20-25 Travel	By 40 have family and good job 30 find a steady life	
E10	19 Uni	21 Travel Australia in van while writing 23 Go to America, continue writing 25 Go to England, get involved with BBC 27 Be published		
F10	18-19 Travel as much as possible 19-23 Go to uni	25-27 Live overseas 25 Learn Italian 25+ Have a job in counseling Late 20s Have a family		
G10	17 Do well in HSC 18 Travel 18-22 Go to university-study law	22 Get a job 28 Start a family	30 Travel	
H10	Travel around the world	Be happy/live life/live healthily and happily across whole time 25 Architect Have money Lots of life experiences	30 Have family 33 Artist Possibly marry	Be happy
I10	Travel Learn to ride a horse Complete uni if I can			
J10	19-20 Travel Earn lots of money Have lots of life experience	Get married Have kids		Have grandkids Live a long time
K10	Finish school 18-19 Travel 19-23 Uni	23-27 Live overseas 27-35 In Africa	30 Learn French 32 Learn piano 36-40 Settle into a job I like that pays well 30 Earn money 35 Travel 35 Live overseas 35-40 Settled in 30 Kids	
L10	18-19 Different language Uni	20-25 Overseas 25-26 Design company 28 India 29 Live in city		
M10	18 Finish Year 12 19-20 Bible college/other similar study	25 Travel 28 Work, married		
N10	Finish Year 12 Travel Go to uni Get job	Own house and car Get married Have kids		
O10	Finish high school Choose career Go to uni Travel	Steady income Perhaps get married Own house and car		
P10	18 Finish school 19 Get buff	21 Be a fashion designer 22-23 Travel with designing and live overseas	30 Have enough money to buy house with someone and get married	Retire and live in my holiday beach house

Participant	Before turning 20	20-30	30-40	40+ years of age
Q10	Start a band Year in England	25 Finished uni Get married	35 Be still married	50 Still be totally in love and both be alive Stay young inside Globe-trot Laugh at Paris Hilton when she is old
R10	18 Uni Become a scientist Car	22-23 Sponsor a child 26 Married, fall in love, kids, house, beach	30 Comfortable Money/retirement fund	
S10	Finish Year 12 Go to uni	Travel to England	Own a house and car Get married Have children	

Most of the girls lived in a nuclear family (12/18) and of the remaining six, two lived in a nuclear step-family, and a further two lived in a shared arrangement, week about, with both parents. Two of these girls had no siblings and seven of them were the eldest sibling. Six of the participants came from families where children were a single gender. Twelve of the girls (66%) indicated they were in paid employment at the time of completing the profile. The types of work indicated included hospitality and retail, with one participant indicating she taught music to younger children.

Outside of school, the girls played a diverse range of sports, with netball the most popular (5/18). Attending the gym was also important (4/18). Individual sport activities such as running, swimming and jogging were listed, as well as unusual sports including fencing and archery. One girl identified five sports that she took part in regularly, including tennis, basketball, athletics, cricket and hockey. Most of the girls indicated more than one sport and only three girls indicated they played no sport. As well as sports, the girls regularly participated in a range of other activities outside of school. Seven of the girls (38%) played an instrument, with only two indicating the piano, and three girls indicated they also played in a band. Babysitting was a common activity with 50% of the girls listing it as an out of school activity. Two girls participated in public speaking outside of school, three were involved in charity work and three listed church as a regular activity. Four girls identified art as a leisure activity, while three enjoyed photography and some participated in dance or drama.

When asked to identify their hobbies, half of the Year 10/11 girls consistently identified reading as a hobby and half noted that music was something they considered a hobby. Connecting to other people—through face-to-face socialising (33%), Facebook (16%) or talking (11%)—was listed as a hobby. Media interaction included television (33%), movies (33%) and the computer/Internet (11%). A number

of hobbies were also listed by individuals that suggested a range of different, creative interests including vintage music collecting, reworking vintage clothes, interior design, drawing and baking. Every girl listed more than one hobby, with some listing up to five. There was a great diversity of choices with regard to music, books and movies, ranging from classic to current, and generic to specific preferences among the girls.

Two-thirds of the girls identified family as highly important. Two of the girls listed both family and friends as their first priority, while two other girls listed friends as a higher priority than family. Health was identified in the top three priorities for 66% of the girls, and while two of them placed their boyfriend as their highest value, ten of the girls noted that they either did not have a current boyfriend or that he was not a high priority. They were also asked to place importance on appearance, pets and jobs and here preferences were scattered. Across the group 16 girls considered themselves happy, and 12 considered themselves healthy. None of the girls indicated that they felt they were successful, four of them felt bored and six of them felt they were challenged. While four of the girls considered themselves definitely a leader, a further six felt that they were a leader sometimes. Twelve of the 18 girls who responded to the survey identified that they felt different to others, with a further two showing they felt different sometimes. The full results of this section of the profile are included in Appendix 15 (Table 2).

In each focus group session the girls generated sustained conversations even though they were not all close friends or in the same social group. While there were differences of opinion there were not conflicts around these differences. Some girls remained silent unless the question was directed specifically to them, although this lessened over the time of data collection. There were times when each girl made specific remarks that demonstrated a high interest in, or strong opinion of, a topic. At School A, there were two outspoken girls who had quite different views and while one had ‘followers’, the other tended to speak alone. As well, there was one individual who did not always speak but held the floor when she did. She appeared comfortable as a leader and commanded attention in this way as the others listened when she spoke. The School B group tended to share the conversation and to reflect each other’s ideas more frequently.

Table 5.2: Aspirations of Year 10/11 girls

Careers	Travel	Meeting Famous People	Family	Property	Lifestyle	Other
Finish Year 12 (9)	England	Johnny Depp	Get married (5)	Own house (6)	Live comfortably on double income	Sponsor a child
Go to university (12)	Travel (12)	Someone	Have children (7)	Own car (6)	Comfortable	Help people
Forensic scientist	Live overseas (4)	Russell T Davis	Get married later in life	Own house by beach	money/retirement fund	Get my licence (3)
Photojournalist	Travel and document	John Barrowman	Have grandchildren	Live in a big house with pets	Live in a share house	Fall in love (2)
Communications degree	Live in France				Have a steady income (3)	Charity work
Own my own shop and café	Japan				Get a job (3)	Photograph a lion
Try to be a half decent artist	Egypt				Have a really worthwhile job	Write a book
Be a pirate	See the world				Get a good paying job which is challenging yet rewarding (2)	Good marks (3)
Be a fashion designer	Work overseas				Enjoy my job	Get published
Choose a career	Road trip				Learn to cook	Learn to fix a car engine
Bible College or similar	Alone in a renovated van				Live as a poor artist	Go to Mardi Gras
Successful career	In a hot air balloon				Live to be really old (2)	Read the Bible and Koran and Jewish Bible
Preschool teacher	Germany				Get really buff	Learn another language (4)
Make/be in a movie or a film	Travel the world and see unusual things—even if it mean being financially poor for a time				Play sport	Animals-find out more about their habitats
Study creative writing	Live in Africa and help people for a few years				Stay fit and healthy (2)	Know how to ride a horse
Get involved in BBC Journalism(2)	Go to India				Live a meaningful life	Play piano well
Start a newspaper					Be happy (2)	See the world at peace (am skeptical about this)
Counseling					Be independent	
Working with kids					Be happy and content with my life (2)	
Law					Maintain strong relationships with family and friends (2)	
Architect					A good life (2)	
Design things/art					Live happily ever after	
Drawing/graphic design					Find happiness within myself-accept who I am	
Landscape designing					Outdoors-adventuring	
Design buildings overseas					Have life experience (2)	
Study public relations					Broaden my horizons	
Start a design company					Live in city	

One girl disappeared from the group after three focus groups and the girls expressed concern that she had changed and was not showing a positive attitude to school or her future. She did not reappear for the interviews or submit her journal. As the girls gathered together I was struck by their initial sense of confidence and enthusiasm for the discussion. During the time we spent together, they continued to exhibit confidence as the talk flowed, but it was interspersed with times when their struggle to work out who they were and what was important to them was evident.

5.2.2 Identity

The concept of identity appeared in the conversations both explicitly and implicitly as the girls described the way they saw themselves and the influences on their self-image. For these girls, identity was about making decisions to follow trends, or not. It was also about the expectations placed on an individual in terms of behaviour, appearance and activity. Their stories and responses told of conflict they experienced in terms of their sense of self, and defined the people and environmental elements that influenced their developing identity.

When asked to define identity, the girls expressed a number of ideas that highlighted the connections between context and identity, as indicated in the following excerpt:

P: ... how the world perceives you and how you ...

P: And how you perceive them.

P: ... your connection to the world.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, B&M&H

Their comments demonstrated that they had spent some time thinking about who they were, and who they would be. The following excerpt reflected an understanding that identity changed over a lifetime, and that each person held a number of identities according to the context they were in:

R: Do you know who you are?

P2: I think so.

P1: I have a fair idea but it will probably change a million times.

P2: I know who I am now.

P1: ... with a change of job, you're again changing your identity ...

R: So do you have a different identity there than you do at school?

P1: ... I think I do because I ... only go to school with one of the girls I work with, she's a really good friend of mine. And then the rest of the people I've known ... since only two or three months ago ... I guess you do act differently around different people.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Similarly, the girls at School B described the fact that they adjusted their identity in different contexts, as this excerpt illustrated:

- P: I think it changes because ... it depends on who I'm talking to... I change my habits of how I'm talking because some people talk intellectually ... I have to go, is that someone who I'd have to change it because they don't understand me.
- R: Does that matter?
- P: I don't think so, not so much, because it's just how it is. I mean, if you talk really intellectually all the time people would get really confused and think you're showing off.
- P: ... You've got to ... fit into the group.
- P: You don't want to be rude ... to another person because it might upset them... I've talked different in here than I would to the people I go play hockey with because it's a completely different situation.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, B&M&H

The following excerpt highlighted the feeling of insecurity experienced by the girls at this point, as they worked out who they were, and how they felt about the expectations of others:

- P3: I have ... issues and insecurities ... who am I really, what is my purpose in the world, what am I doing here ... I think generally like I've had many moments where I've ... just sort of gone through and just thought okay, dot by dot point, who am I, what am I like, just sort of like you know, very basic stuff ... I can accept who I am
- P1: ... a lot of Year 8 and Year 9 was spent trying to conform and to try and impress people and this sort of thing. In the end ... [I thought] this is so time consuming and I just don't need this. I don't need to be able to be so paranoid about everything.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B&G

Sometimes having a sense of identity enabled an individual to be in control of what was happening, and to be clear on what they were able to do.

- P1: You know your boundaries, like your limitations, what you can do or what you can't do.
- P2: What you're capable of and what you want in life.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

As the girls discussed their thoughts on identity, the changing, and increasingly tense, relationships between some of the girls and their parents emerged as something they were struggling with. Some remained happy that their parents' values were something they could continue to believe in.

- P1: I guess my parents' values are very much the same ... my values are the same ... I never found any problem with them.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Those in conflict with families were identifying beliefs held by their parents that they were not so sure of anymore, and in some cases their attempts to assert their own views led to conflict and a changed perception of their families.

P3: ... it's not that I dislike my parents ... we are very different in many ways ... I'm quite a good mix of both ... that sort of combination is what makes me who I am, not necessarily like either of my parents ... just my own little extra.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B&G

P5: For the past ... 14 or 15 years of my life, I've abided by the rules at home ... I've been like, you know, the good girl who did everything right, never got in trouble ... This year ... for the first time ... I'm not agreeing with choices that they're making ... I can see your reason but ... what about what I want. Like school subjects ... people I want to hang out with ... I'm sort of starting to make my own decisions but it's causing conflict.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B&G

Increased parental control frustrated the girls who were used to a relationship with their parents that involved a sense of approval, as these girls described in the following interaction:

P: It always really angers me because I grew up ... in a house where I can just do whatever like, be whoever I wanted sort of thing ... why can't parents just understand?

P: ... I still don't yell at ... my parents at all, just because I was never allowed to ... so I am still the child ... but ... lately I have been getting more annoyed at them ... say something and then walk away. I won't just stand there and hear their point of view ... I don't really get along with my parents ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B&G

The girls recognised that parental expectations influenced the experience, opportunity and freedom to try different ways of responding to the world, thus supporting the building of identity, as shown in the following excerpt:

P: I always just knew my parents let me be and do whatever I wanted ... they let me ... discover ... I went through a stage of horrible music taste ... They put up with it and they just waited ... I went through a tomboy phase ... they've always ... let me be who I wanted to but I've never had that pressure of, or confusion of who I want ... what I want to do.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

They did not think that the world of school was a clear indicator of who an individual would be in later life, because it was different to the real world, and limited the way individuals could 'be' as shown in this excerpt from the interview transcripts:

P1: In school ... you're not really in the real world ... you have an identity but I don't think you really get it until you leave school, it's kind of just a bubble we're in at the moment ... once you ... grow up a bit ... you become your own person a bit more than when you're in high school.

Interview School B, Year 10/11, M&R

5.2.3 Influences on Identity

While the girls recognised that one's identity emerged from within, they showed awareness that external forces shaped its development. In the following excerpts, they talked about the influences on the building of personal identity, recognising that peers, families and others they interacted with both at school and out of school, impacted on their decisions.

P1: I don't really care about what's trendy, but I guess everyone does on a certain level.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P1: ... you sort of follow ... if there was a movie out that's not cool you don't go and see it ... if it's a good movie ... everyone says, 'Oh, that's a really cool movie, it's good' ... I'd go and see it.

P1: It depends on who tells you ... if a friend said to me, 'Oh, that's a good movie' ... I'd go and see it ... if my brother said to me 'That's a good movie' ... I'm not going to see that ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The girls highlighted the importance of advice and feedback from their peers, and the impact that the opinions of peers had on the choices they made. There was a sense in their conversation that meeting the need to be aligned with peers was something that everyone did.

The fact that this could be a negative influence on identity is described in the next excerpt:

P1: ... one calls his girlfriend ... ugly ... and she actually thinks that ...

P2: She believed what he said

P1: ... if you get told it enough then you start to believe it.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

It is evident in this interaction that the girls were conscious of how comments and feedback, given often enough, can influence what a girl believes about herself, and either force her to feel negatively towards herself or cause her to assert herself in inappropriate ways. What the peer group saw as normal seemed to be an important aspect of social interaction (*You want to be normal but what is normal?* Participant, School A). The next excerpt reinforced this suggestion, highlighting that friends are a key driver of responses and behaviours.

P1: ... your parents have an impact on you ... I like to please them with the school thing just the overall that I'm a nice person ... my friends they have a big influence on me ...

P1: Mum says, 'You can't wear that' and ... that's what everyone's wearing so I'm going to wear it anyway.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Establishing an identity was work for these adolescent girls, and their conversation indicated that it was a struggle to meet the expectations of friends and family, and media images. The following excerpt identified the realisation that self-esteem was important and that confidence in oneself led to the capacity to be different to others and to be able to resist the messages from the media.

- P1: I think no one really goes, 'Oh, that is how we are supposed to look' but everyone subconsciously goes ... 'I'd like to look thin, I'd like to be a size 8'.
- P2: Or if you get teased and stuff ... then you think I'd like to ...
- P3: ... maybe I need to be like that.
- P4: I think it depends on your self-esteem ... if you're comfortable in yourself then you won't be affected ...
- P2: You are going to feel good about yourself.
- P5: And other people may feel they are not worthy enough ... have to be like the other people to be noticed.
- P4: I've struggled with my body image since I was about ten and I only recently accepted the fact that I am who I am ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Despite their confidence, these interactions showed that these Year 10/11 gifted girls were working through the process of defining their personal identity, and that this process was impacted on by external factors, including family, friends and media sources. At the same time as they were doing this personal work, they were looking to the future, and their conversation also described their aspirations for themselves through the timeline and their life goals.

5.2.4 Aspirations

When the girls were asked to talk about their aspirations they entered the discussion with energy and enthusiasm. Completing the goal activity generated considerable conversation about possibilities for their futures. The girls at School A, in particular, enthusiastically shared their goals, laughed at their ideas and interacted about their plans. Some of the suggestions were acknowledged as fanciful as they suggested they would meet famous people or take up unusual pursuits. Some girls had very clear plans and others were not certain about their aspirations. As they shared their ideas, girls in both settings acknowledged the differences personal preferences make. There was some piggybacking of ideas but some surprising ones, including a desire to read the Jewish Bible (School A, Year 10/11 participant). While the full summary of the goals can be found in Table 5.2, the following

excerpts, taken from focus group transcripts, demonstrate the tone and content of the conversation around the future:

P1: Meet Johnny Depp—that's one of my aspirations.

P2: I have a list of things I want to do—just random things.

P1: I want to travel around somewhere in Australia in a van that I pull out the back and put in a bed.

P2: I want to go to a Mardi Gras one day.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P1: Book, work, London.

P2: I want to go to London. I want to go and live over there.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P1: Let's go to Africa.

P2: No, I want to go to America.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

As this activity was completed in the first year of the research project while the girls were in Year 10, a relevant topic was their next two years of school, and what choices they would make to study. These excerpts show that they planned to finish Year 12, and further education was, for most of the girls, part of their future at some point.

P5: I want to go to uni but I don't know what I want to do.

P6: I don't know what I want to do at uni ... something at uni and get a job. I don't know what that job is.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P1: I want to go to uni and do ... a business course in event management with marketing ...

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

P1: If you go to uni people respect you because you are going that extra step,

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Along with an intent to have more education and to undertake diverse experiences, as shown in Table 5.2, most of the girls included children and families in their futures, as these excerpts highlight:

P1: Average pass. Get married and have children.

P2: No one's actually written fall in love. No one here has written fall in love.

P3: Get married [laughter].

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P1: When I was little I always wanted to have kids so bad.

P4: You want to do it but you want to do other stuff as well.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P5: I'm not having children.

P2: I don't know if I'm having children [laughing].

P3: I'm having one.

P4: I'm having two: a boy and a girl.

P1: I'm having three.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

While they had included family along with education, careers and travel, when they placed them on the timeline to indicate how they imagined they would fulfil these goals, a pattern emerged around their expectations, which one girl noted was perhaps not realistic.

P: ... a lot to do in one year—travel, live overseas and then settle down.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

In most of the cases, as Table 5.1 showed, the girls predicted their life goals would be achieved by 30 years of age. They were not able to think realistically about themselves in older age, defining the ideal age as 21 to 25 years of age, as shown in the next excerpts:

P5: By the time you are 25 you sort of have the maturity and you have had life experiences; you are still not like a little kid.

P1: 25; you have the respect a bit of society ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P1: I'm not going to count my age when I get past 50, I'm just going to stay at 50. I'm going to be a really cool grandma ... with the ear piercings and the tattoos and stuff.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

They felt that their aspirations were not that different from those of their school cohort. As rural young people they expected to leave their home town, as the following interaction highlighted:

R: Do you think your aspirations are like most people in your year?

P1: Yeah.

P2: Pretty much.

P4: Everyone wants to settle down.

P5: Everyone thinks they are going to travel but a lot of people seem to always come back to here.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Aspirations reflected both experience and the influences of family and friends and were part of the ongoing conversation for these Year 10/11 girls. The excerpts showed that they developed their aspirations as individuals, although there were common elements and it was evident that they influenced each other as they talked about their futures. However, the next excerpt alluded to another influence on young girls as they planned their future. The power of a stereotyped, popular culture toy to create an expectation of the future emerged in this excerpt:

P1: Everyone when they're little wanted to be like Barbie ... but she's a stereotype.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

In the data from the School A group, a final comment reflected some deep thinking about the possible life opportunities available to these gifted girls in a regional setting. This participant clearly did not feel that she was limited in what she could do in her life, and saw the necessary requirements for achievement as being access to education and an ability to achieve in education settings.

P1: I don't really think there is anything to stop you from doing what you want if you like. I feel sorry for the people who live in third world countries because they really ... have no opportunities, but here you pretty much have everything available ... even if you don't have the money ... to be able to study but you have the smarts and the opportunity for education to get there. Whatever you want to be, it's pretty much you can do anything like, if you want to you can do it. Because there's nothing to stop you.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

5.2.5 Being Identified as Gifted

At the schools these girls attend there was no formal identification process for gifted students and so, at the time of participant selection, none of them had been formally identified as gifted. Unlike the Year 7/8 girls, they had not had the chance to be enrolled in an Opportunity Class prior to entering high school, and geographically there was no selective high school in the public system that they could attend. Their selection for the research was based on their results in their Year 9 NAPLAN tests, where they had achieved in the top percentiles of both Literacy and Numeracy. Their suitability was then confirmed by in-school results across their years of high school that placed them at the top of their year cohort academically, and

anecdotal confirmation from teaching staff. In both settings, the teacher who provided the names fully supported the selection of these girls as gifted.

The girls themselves had not previously thought about themselves as gifted students. While it was not discussed with their families, the following excerpts demonstrate some of the different responses families had to their identification, through the invitation to be part of the research project.

P1: They thought I was really smart and I was really proud [general laughter].

P1: They were really happy ... with me ... they didn't think I could be that smart. Well I proved them wrong.

P2: Mine were really surprised.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P1: They were okay about it.

P2: They were fine about it.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P2: My dad wants me to be this marvellous smart person and I know I'm not going to get there but I don't know, I'm pushing myself.

R: Do you think you are smart?

P2: Can be.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, R&M

There was a mixed, but generally positive, response to being identified as smart, shown in the following excerpt:

P: I don't like it.

P: I feel like I can cope.

P: I like it.

P: Yeah, I like it.

P: You feel better if you're talking to other people who aren't, shall we say, as intelligent.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

This response was tempered by discussion about how others would react to the labelling, as this interaction highlighted:

P: ... some girls would be ... 'you're weird' and 'nerd' ...

P: Yeah, nerd.

R: Does the word nerd get used?

P: Oh yes.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

It was evident that, while there was some reservation about their new label, the girls felt it appropriate. In the interviews, they were asked explicitly about their identification as gifted for this project, and how they had previously seen themselves in the school context. In both settings, the discussion identified that they had felt some differences, and that others had given them a label based on their academic performance, as described in the following excerpts:

P1: [Laughter] ... we've sort of been told since we were younger ... included in academic programs and stuff since Year 6 so...

R: ... there's no formal identification here ... Were you surprised by the people in the room?

P2: Not really, they're the people ... we've always known that they're fairly intelligent ...

P1: And the conversations with everybody ... fairly intelligent ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

P: ... the girls that ... were labelled it, already knew we were the smart girls ...

P: Gifted and talented.

P: I only thought there was one gifted and talented girl.

P: ... people label us as intelligent but they don't say we're gifted or talented or anything like that. But it does make a difference.

P: ... we've always been in the top classes. So it didn't make a difference.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

R: Do you think your strengths are academic strengths or are they more artistic creative strengths?

P1: Probably more academic. I'm not a creative person.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

R: Do you think any other things would put you in the groups that we picked?

P1: I picked it because of the NAPLAN.

R: So were you surprised?

P1: Yeah, because I thought I bombed, I don't really remember much of Year 9 but I was pretty sure I did pretty badly in NAPLAN.

R: But you've always done all right at school haven't you?

P1: Yes.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

A revealing conversation about being gifted at school occurred in the group at School A. The conversation indicated a level of scepticism about school and teachers' knowledge and an

insight into how one of these girls responded, in a very cynical tone, when she had knowledge beyond that expected in the classroom.

P: We had a quiz and there were three questions and I know I got one wrong but he still gave me ten out of ten.

R: How do you know you got one wrong?

P: Coz it was when dinosaurs were extinct and I looked it up and it was 145-65 million years ago and I put 60 million years ago. I know it was wrong but he gave me full marks ... [laughter] ... good teacher ... [more laughs].

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

While there had been no formal identification, the girls indicated through their conversation that they were conscious that they were able to achieve successfully in academic tasks at school. They had not considered themselves as gifted but had felt different, and had some different experiences, from other girls during their time at school.

5.2.6 Rurality

These girls live in a regional city, and the schools they attended were classified as rural/remote within the Department of Education and Communities 2012 classification. The classification remained the same in 2014 (http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/documents/15060385/15385042/rural_remote_school_list.pdf).

For most of their lives, most of these girls had lived, and gone to school, in this location. They realised there were differences between themselves and girls of the same age in metropolitan areas, but they did not necessarily feel disadvantaged. However, they did want to experience living somewhere else. In the interviews, they discussed where they wanted to be when they finished school, as the following excerpts show:

P2: It's so small here and you want to get out there and see the world.

P1: I don't want to be one of those people ... stuck here forever ... if I go to uni here then I'll get a job here and then I'll live here for the rest of my life ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

P5: ... even though I really wanted to ... [live] in a city and have all the different sort of opportunities and university courses ... I'm trying to find a university course here ... it's two hours from X and that's not that much of a drive. Yet it's not over-populated and there are good places here and it is a great university...

P5: It's just the good things here ... it's not massively busy ... you're not always going to be worried about terrorist attacks.

P4: Here is still too small for me.

P1: I just think it's home, and I think home is a place that you should come back to, not that you should stay home for the rest of your life ... I'd like to go to a big city ...

P1: I want to travel, I want to go overseas, I want to go to Europe, I want to see the world and then ... I want to have kids ... I don't really want to bring up kids in the city because the city kind of scares me ... 20 years down the track, come back ... it will be different ... but it will still be home to me.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B&G

At this point in their lives, they did feel that there were differences between their lifestyle and that of city girls they knew. City girls appeared to have had more experience in risky places, had access to better resources and to have a more sophisticated social life as the interaction below shows:

R: So are you different to girls from the city your age...?

P1: I reckon we are

P2: We're not so much up with the fashion

P3: We have friends in Sydney and they'd be 13 or 14 they are northern beaches girls. There's lots of money in the family but they go out every weekend and get drunk ... they've taken drugs before ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P2: ... the ones that live in the city they're a lot more confident ... feeling like they'll succeed.

P2: Yeah, they've got so much more resources and ... better schools ...

P1: They have more life experience than us because ... there's nothing really interesting happens here ... they would have so many cool experiences ...

P1: They're more street smart than us.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The girls felt that their peers in the city were less motivated to achieve as they had more opportunities provided for them, as this interview conversation highlighted:

P1: I think we're that more ambitious, I think that we're more modest.

P3: ... they are just incredibly confident.

P2: I think they're exposed to a lot more as well like ...

P3: ... they're exposed to a heap of stuff that we don't even know about sort of, well that most country people don't really know about.

P1: I know a girl ... her friends ... go out every weekend and there's pictures of them in the Cross ... I wouldn't even go down when I was 20, I'm only 17... they have a lot more opportunities given to them and particularly when they have wealthy parents ... They can pretty much get what they want because they're all stunningly beautiful as well.

P2: They lack the motivation to do like, to succeed for themselves because their parents have already succeeded, they can just live off that.

P3: They're insecure.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Some of the girls had little experience with girls from the city, as their families were all from rural areas and continued to live in rural areas, as described in the excerpts below:

P1: Most of my entire family lives here ... I don't know anyone from anywhere else.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

P3: I think of myself as a country girl...

P3: I don't consider here to be all that rural. It's got most of the kind of connections except for the culture we were talking ... that there was like none here.

P4: ... my mum's from F which is really small like 8,000 people which is not all that small but it is. And if I go [there] and I come back ... thankful that I live here ... anywhere west I cannot stand ... it's just too ... in the sticks for me.

Interview, School A, H&B&G

These rural adolescent gifted girls had both an awareness of their rurality and a sense that this did not disadvantage them. They had confidence that it was not necessarily going to prevent them achieving what they wanted to achieve, as this final statement indicated:

P1: ... I never felt ... disadvantaged because I'm from the country ... maybe we are, but we just don't notice that, I didn't really think we were.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

5.3 Popular Culture

5.3.1 Defining Popular Culture

Some of the Year 10/11 girls had studied popular culture in English curriculum classes and indicated a confidence in describing it, but they still had difficulty pinning it down to a single definition. Their responses showed a breadth of possibilities when defining popular culture, both as an object and a concept. There was richness to the discussions that highlighted the

pervasiveness of popular culture in their lives. The following excerpts present some initial responses to the question, “What is popular culture?”

P1: Annoying.

P2: ... celebrities having an effect on us ... the way we see celebrities and models and how we feel about ourselves looking at people like that.

P4: Today’s commercial world—say billboards, magazines, TV, movies.

P5: The normal things that are evil.

P6: Like music, and clothes, and stuff.

P8: Trends.

P9: Trends, relationships and everything.

P8: Celebrity gossip [laughter].

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

The excerpts demonstrate the diverse responses from across the Year 10/11 participants, including an indication of the strong reactive feelings they showed about popular culture. The girls connected popular culture to media and its celebrities and also to personal esteem and image. The definitions are both abstract notions and more concrete items or objects.

Other comments defined popular culture as a reflection of age, defined by the group that an individual is a member of. These excerpts demonstrate this concept:

P3: ... in primary school it’s the latest thing and other people seeing what they’ve got and there’s ... fashion

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

R: So it’s a bit age related and friend related?

P2: Yeah, yeah, because your friends like the same sort of things as you ...

P2: And if ... everybody is talking about a movie ... and you haven’t seen it, you feel really left out.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P1: Mainstream society and what’s popular.

P2: ... it’s just stuff that’s popular to our age group ... what’s cool and what’s not.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Most clearly, the girls' definitions of popular culture connected to social contexts and interactions. The fact that it could mean something different to different people also emerged in the discussion, as the girls noted that groups could establish a trend.

Initial conversation led to some creative definitions suggested by individuals as ways of looking at popular culture. Year 10/11 girls explored creative ways of defining their connections with popular culture rather than relying on common definitions that placed it mainly in the realm of publicly mediated material. The next excerpt presents the most original suggestion for a definition, which was met with affirmation by the particular group it was mentioned in.

- R: Where do you find popular culture?
- P9: The contents of someone's handbag [laughter]. Their phone, their iPod, their fancy lipgloss, their magazine, book, whatever they have. Then that is their culture—it's in someone's handbag.
- P1: In different handbags you might find different things ... [general laughter].
- P9: I feel like someone's handbag actually says a lot about them ... some people have ... leather with all the bits of jangly bright colours and glitter, and other people have the calico 'support the thing in Tanzania' bags—and it just sort of says so what they are interested in and what they think.
- P8: You would have a range of those handbags [laughs]—patent leather to green Woolworths shopping bag [laughter].

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

One participant created visual representations of her definitions of popular culture in her journal. This visual representation included cosmetics, clothing, icons, article headings and specific names of television shows and magazine titles. It was a diverse collection of ideas that reinforced the definitions expressed by the focus group conversations (Appendix 16).

This discussion brought to attention the way these Year 10/11 girls defined popular culture in relation to themselves. Popular culture had an impact on personal choices; it was about objects and it was dynamic rather than static. There were other definitions proposed that showed a broad interpretation of the concept of popular culture, not limited to media, as the following excerpts show:

- P4: Like haircuts ...
- P5: Like the fringe.
- P4: ... she was like all over magazines and ... the big full fringe.

P1: It's because someone famous has it so they want it.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P4: Like fashion, and how you dress and how everybody sees you ...

P5: They just see it on people. Imagery and magazines stuff.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Only four of the Year 10/11 girls returned their journal log at the end of the research project and their entries highlighted the different forms of media they defined as popular culture, including movies, television, books, radio, magazines, social events and the Internet. Entries also listed the people who were with the girls as they engaged with popular culture. The place of peers was highlighted as friends were most frequently listed, followed by family members (mother, sibling, father). Many of the girls also spent considerable time watching or engaging alone with popular culture.

The influence of the peer group on choice and on what was seen as popular was evident in the conversations. Peers, media and celebrities were all identified as sources of inspiration. The girls' definitions explored the idea that popular culture was a construction of reality that represented their world and was found everywhere in their lives. Its content connected to their lives, and provided ideas for behaviour, clothing, and self-representation to the world.

5.3.2 The Content of Popular Culture: Visual Media

As the girls discussed their interactions with visual, music, printed and interactive media, the conversation focused on the content of popular culture, and how it represented and reflected them. When talking about visual media, including television and movies, the Year 10/11 girls expressed preferences for certain types of show, rather than random engagement. Their responses highlighted that they were all familiar with the elements and constructions of popular shows. Rather than talk at length about individual shows, the Year 10/11 girls tended to talk in genres, with references made to examples of the genre. There was evidence that they were familiar with many shows and that there was some consistency across the groups in terms of what they watched and responded to. The following excerpt demonstrates their interest in horror movies and how they responded to the genre:

P: Yeah to 'The Shining', which is slightly different.

P: Slightly. It was pretty grim.

P: It was very slow.

P: It's more psychological.

P: I like psychological movies. I don't like black horror movies much.

- P: Like the horror movies now all have ...
- P: They all have orgies.
- P: It's more blood, guts, better torture, put a lot of people in a room and torture them.
- P: It's so ridiculous.
- P: ... they used to have all the suspense and the psychological stuff and now it's just straight into the blood and gore. I think it shows a lot of how stuff has changed and it shows what people are scared of ... now they're scared of people and they're scared of the future and that's basically what everything's about.
- P: You just don't want to know.
- P: ... if we're scared of people and ... of what is to come then there's no way we can ever avoid that. Whereas like 'Aliens', there's like a ...
- P: Like a barrier.
- P: ... we can probably know that there's not going to be an alien invasion in the next five minutes, but we don't know whether a group of psycho people with weapons are going to come in ... a terrorist attack at school.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The girls recognised the symbiotic relationship between popular culture and its audience. Their conversation acknowledged that popular culture was constructed to evoke reaction in an audience that knew this, but continued to respond emotionally. The conversation indicated a close familiarity with the content of many different movies and shows, but it also moved beyond recount to more analytical conversation about the concepts and ideas presented in the media, and the deliberate construction of media for effect.

These girls were cynical about soap operas, describing the plot lines as exaggerated, with 'dramatic' content that engaged the viewer in an addictive fashion. As they spoke, their voices and body language dramatically mimicked the words they were speaking, and the conversation included laughter about the pseudo-seriousness of the events on these shows.

The following excerpts describe their responses to soap opera plot lines:

- P1: ... when you are watching normal TV, like 'Neighbours' ... he's going to die and he's just fallen over ...
- P2: And he had died, and he hadn't ...
- P3: And now he has amnesia—
- P1: I missed a bit and then they found him and ...
- P4: I thought ... was dead ...
- P3: But it was amnesia!
- P4: But he was dead!
- P3: Amnesia.

P3: You get so hooked into it because it's so exaggerated ...

P4: Stupid ... as if that would happen ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

The girls were very aware of the content and characters, and key features of the soap opera genre. The following excerpt is an example of this aspect of the conversation:

P: Why is it ... sex and relationships in every show ...

P: The common thing is always the relationships and how they're dysfunctional and break up...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

They talked about other shows that were popular with their age group and they identified a number of genres that they regularly watched and enjoyed, including horror, drama, comedy and reality shows. Humour appeared to be an important element of preferred viewing, as the following excerpt highlights:

P: I really like humour that ... you have to ... go and think about ... That's really clever.

P: You have to use your intelligence too.

P: The 'IT Crowd' was fantastic.

P: That was good. I kind of like ... black humour ... really serious stuff, but then they get funny.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

It was interesting to note their level of sensitivity to the racism and sexism evident in the visual media that they watched. The girls had clear ideas about what was acceptable and judged the effectiveness of the humour by these standards. Their comments indicated that they preferred humour and visual entertainment that challenged their thinking and had an intellectual component.

Despite a small number of journals to examine, there was a clear pattern in the journal log entries of critical commentary on the plots, actors and content across a range of visual media. In responding to the content in popular culture, the girls noted when they found that the content caused them to think about issues or when plots were poorly constructed. The following excerpts from their journals demonstrate their critiques of the media they engaged with:

Very funny and enjoyable. Clever and witty, a great show with good script, cast, plot, humour and acting.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

Adaption of original Shakespearean play and well suited to modern audience.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

It is funny and easy to watch, not much substance. A few life lessons.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

I liked it, very deep themes. Nice love story although a very sad ending, Made me think.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

I love this show so I can just sit and watch it forever. The images it shows/popular culture area is the fashion, fame and wealth as well as drinking, and drugs occasionally.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10A

The girls also offered a number of negative comments that highlighted their capacity to engage with popular culture while also being able to recognise where it did not represent the full truth, or where its messages caused some concerns.

Again, supposed to be horror but was just ridiculous. Poor acting and plot line, script ... poor everything.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

It was a bit silly... The fashion industry is cruel. I think it is fake and staged.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

Pretty predictable and poor acting, but was still scary in places.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

For the most part, these participants preferred shows with humour, engaging and realistic plots and effective acting. In another part of the conversation the girls talked about their enjoyment of British media, which they felt was more creative and included different types of people. The girls perceived cultural differences in visual media as this excerpt highlights:

P: ... when you look at American humour it's stupid ... what they joke about is stupid things, but when it comes down to British humour it's really quick, sharp and witty.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

5.3.3 Reality Shows and Independent Media

At the time of the data collection, reality television was prevalent on free-to-air programming and included shows about cooking, survival, relationships and creative performances. The girls watched these shows for various reasons, as discussed in the following excerpt:

P: I don't know why, you just do ... it's just like you want to know.

P: I think all the girls have been watching it, I love it.

P: And my mum too, everyone in our family, my father, everyone.

P: Yeah, it's a compulsion.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

They noted that not only were these shows based on a formula but that the concept of challenging an expert or another team member created their appeal, especially when the underdog was able to win, as explored below:

P: It's so funny when the 'MasterChef's' lose because you think they've been going for years, these people have been cooking for how long?

P: And they just got beaten on their signature dish.

P: ... there's ... amateur chefs, people who want to become chefs, they go all around the country of Australia ... the best 50 people ...

P: ... there's different ... challenges ... you might have a team challenge or ... pressure challenge ...

P: Dad reckons that they've got a formula ... used to not be popular ... they've just got some formula that works now.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

P: There's like 'Survivor', don't really watch that.

P: I don't watch 'Survivor' ...

P: ... you see all these people losing a ton of weight and they're all getting really skinny and scrawny ...

P: Yeah, what else is there, 'Australia's Got Talent'.

P: I really don't think Australia has a lot of talent to show.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

While the reality shows were clearly part of mainstream popular culture, these girls were also cognisant of the independent media stream, and had considered the construction of these movies in a critical way, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

P: The movies are really, really different ... not like, Universal Studios ...

P: And they have like really weird topics.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

P: They're really bad quality.

P: They're meant to be like that.

P: Even in 'Texas Chain Saw Massacre', they made it in 1970 something and they used ... really grainy six-inch film so it looked like it was real, so everyone thought it was a snuff movie.

P: What's a snuff movie?

P: It means like it actually happened.

P: But they shot it like a documentary.

P: ... like it was a documentary and it had actually happened.

P: Actually I thought it was like real footage.

P: ... 'Wolf Creek' ... everybody talks about how it was real.

P: But they don't know what happened to the guy, so they ... elaborated ... based on what happened and then they sort of made it a bit more violent.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The attraction to these movies appeared to be that the topics were different and that the production was less slick than other movies. The girls responded to the horror and the creativity demonstrated in these movies and appeared to prefer them as challenging movies to watch.

5.3.4 The Content of Popular Culture: Music Media

The girls also responded to independent music media quite strongly. Music videos and recordings formed a key topic of conversation with the Year 10/11 girls. They were more interested in the individuality offered in independent music than in the generic images that popular music presented. Their conversation reflected other concerns expressed about the way that popular culture created images that were generic, lacking character and values as this excerpt demonstrated:

P: I just don't like the whole hip hop and ... popular thing ... people ... obsess over it and do the whole fashion thing and I like music as opposed to ... all the popular stuff. The look and the image and all black guys with all their pimping girls ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

P: I respect people that can actually play instruments and actually play music.

- P: And play music for a reason rather than just to make money.
- P: ... they're passionate about it and ... they want to do something because they feel like doing it.
- P: Having said that, I don't think it's fair to ... say that all rap and hip hop ... is just bad because of those stupid behaviours ... Eminem's songs are quite good ...
- P: ... some of the people that are R&B and hip hop ... they're actually really good musicians...
- P: What really annoys me about our generation is ... you look at our parents' music and that was 'The Beatles' and 'The Rolling Stones' and it was actual music, but ... if my kids listen to 'Jay-Z' or '50 Cent', I would not be happy.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Many of the girls at School A were involved in the production and performance of music and played a number of instruments. Their musical background appeared to have impacted on their responses to music in popular culture. They sought creative, original and musically sound performances, as expressed in this excerpt:

- P: But artists actually do write their own music.
- P: Some of them do, but previously a lot more music was written by the artist and ... they played their musical instruments and actually were the whole artist ... now you have the music writers and then they just sing it ...
- P: ... the sound guys ... do all the sync stuff.
- P: And edit it and you think it's natural. I mean you hear it live and it's such a lot of crap.
- P: A lot of female artists do more ... taking other people's stuff that have been written ... Statistically women are better singers than men, something about how they're hearing. I think that's odd.
- P: There are a lot of independent female song writers and there have been in the past, like Janice Joplin and Joan Mitchell and Joan Baez.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The girls felt that the challenge for artists in mainstream popular music culture was to be independent, and to not be influenced by the popular media that expected a certain type of image. Their disappointment when they felt an artist was being unduly influenced was clear and their admiration for artists who were able to withstand the pressure is represented in the following excerpt:

- P: Does anyone listen to Tim Minchin?
- P: Yes.
- P: He's a musical comedian ...
- P: He's a 'ranga.

- P: He's got funky hair and stuff.
- P: ... and he wears eyeliner.
- P: Yeah, and he's really, really good. There's just some lines from a couple of songs ... song called 'Not Perfect' ... about the country or the world and ... it's not perfect, but it's mine. It's really good, but the one that's talking about his body, there's a line that I thought was really good and kind of relate it to popular culture, and 'the weirdest thing about it is, I spent so much time hating it, but it's never said a bad word about me'. Which I think is quite fair ... heaps of people hate their bodies, but it's not really done anything wrong. It's a healthy body, it's just, they hate it anyway.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

- P: ... Jessica Mauboy ...
- P: She's a real person.
- P: Thin girl.
- P: She's actually turning into that though.
- P: Is she?
- P: There's this big thing about, like Jessica's fabulous diet and stuff and like her clips now are all skanky.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The girls identified that many of the visual and lyrical images in popular music were focused on physical body image, and on the social behaviour of artists, as expressed below:

- P: With some of the R&B stuff ... all these scandals ... they have to build this media attention before they actually get their music listened to ... it's not about their music or what they're saying ... it's about their fame and their image and what they look like and what they've done wrong and ... it isn't anything to do with the actual music or what they're playing or what they're trying to say. And I think it's wrong 'cause music should be about music logically enough.
- P: The music nowadays is more focusing on the video clips ... every single female singer is pretty and skinny.
- P: But have you noticed ... Australian artists, they're not like that ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

They were disappointed when music media focused on clothing or appearance rather than musical performance.

- P: In skimpy clothes.
- P: ... size 6 bikinis ... that's not what the world's about ... I like music for actually being music as opposed to being the image that's being accepted by it.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

To a certain extent, the girls were interested in the authenticity of music, which they defined as being when the artist created the music and performed it. They did not agree with the impact of media on the making of music videos or the industry that fed it. In particular, as the

above excerpts showed, it was the girls from School A who had strong opinions about independent musicians and felt that it needed to be encouraged.

An important concern they held was around the tendency of popular music video producers to focus on the body and fashion, which impacted on how girls viewed themselves. They felt it was not appropriate to place greater emphasis on behaviour rather than on the music. They critiqued the fact that these video productions were reinforcing how many girls felt about their bodies. It was clear that they had engaged with music television for considerable amounts of time, even though they did not necessarily approve of it, and that they were not necessarily satisfied with what they saw, as this final comment indicated:

P: We think of the ... quality but that's not basically what it's about. It's just about boobs ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

5.3.5 The Content of Popular Culture: Printed Media

A source of information about their preferred celebrities, including music artists and other information, was print media. Year 10/11 girls were frequent magazine readers and discussed a range of titles that included mainstream magazines in Australia such as 'Cleo' and 'Cosmopolitan', and less mainstream magazines such as 'Frankie' and 'Blunt'. They also were familiar with high-end magazines including 'Harpers Bazaar' and 'Vogue'. They tended to have definite preferences for magazines that reflected their personal interests, as shown in the following excerpts:

P1: I read a lot of music magazines like 'Blunt' ... they're actually really good but they're really expensive.

P2: Who here has heard of 'Frankie'?

P1: I read that one... it's like not many people know about it but it's an art and crafts, music and lifestyle magazine, it's really cool.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P1: 'Cosmo's' got ... a bit of everything ... fashion and the gossip and the ... sex part, the guys and ... bits of everything that girls read ... articles about life... 'TV News' is ... what's on like ... TV.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Magazines provided information about interests as well as fashion and gossip and the sex part. While the girls indicated a level of disdain for the fact that some magazines included little depth of serious content they were familiar with many magazines and had engaged with

various titles over a period of time, now making choices based on interest in the content. The importance of content to this group when selecting magazines is highlighted in these excerpts:

- P2: ... 'Frankie' is a more alternative audience and it's not as mainstream. It kind of cuts through all of the crap to get to the good stuff.
- P3: It's more interesting because it's not ... on the trends or anything like that. And it has different stories about actual people.
- P1: Like the Berlin Wall and stuff.
- Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

I have a subscription. I love being healthy and love the magazine. Has very interesting articles.

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

While the excerpts illustrate a preference for substantive content in print media, there were some differences in opinion about the value of what is included in magazines. Some of the girls sought out magazines that gave them ideas about clothes and accessories, even if they couldn't afford them. The following excerpts highlight this difference:

- P1: Magazines like 'Cleo' and 'Cosmopolitan' ... have ... the styles of clothes but then they have... the pictures that we can afford ...
- P4: It shows you what they are wearing and then says try this, like a cheaper version.
- P5: ... much played down.
- P1: That's actually quite clever of them ... to sell... the idea ... this is ... what's in ... this is what's cool and then it gives you an option to how we could do that.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

- P1: I don't buy magazines for stories; it's for pictures to look at clothes.
- P2: I don't buy them for the cover, I look through them.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

- P4: There are the ones like 'Vogue' and 'Harpers Bazaar' which are pretty much like ad after ad of designer clothing
- P5: The only time you want 'Harpers Bazaar' is when you are cutting out the pictures for your books ...
- P4: ... or your walls.
- P2: They've got no interesting things.
- P1: No articles.
- P3: Any stuff.
- P6: It's all clothes, you should have these shoes and this dress.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

While Year 10/11 girls preferred magazines that provided them with diverse information about people and issues, one of the main purposes suggested for reading them was to find out about fashion. However, the amount of fashion in magazine content was not something these girls necessarily looked for in their reading and their comments about the number of advertisements indicated that many magazines were a source of information about appearance and clothing but did not meet their other needs.

As they discussed the audience for various magazines, the girls recognised that even if popular culture is aimed at one audience, it may attract other groups and this impacted on the purpose of the content. This is illustrated in the next excerpts:

R: Do you reckon that the audience for ‘Cleo’ and ‘Cosmopolitan’ is people your age?

P1: Oh no, I think it’s meant to be bit older.

P1 ... but there are a lot of people out here who read it.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

R: Is it [‘Frankie’] pitched at people your age?

P2: It’s pitched at about 20- to 30-year-old people but it’s interesting, I like it.

R: So how did you start reading it?

P2: I can’t remember—one of my friends got me into it I think.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

A repeated pattern that they had noted was that, even when the magazine defined its audience age bracket, most of the readers would be younger, as these excerpts show:

P3: The thing I find is that girls that read ‘Total Girl’ and whatever, that’s aimed at like 9- to 10-year-olds but 6- to 7-year-olds read it then ‘Girlfriend’ or ‘Dolly’.

P1: That’s aimed at 12- to 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds but most 10- to 12-year-olds read it and then ‘Cosmo’ and ‘Cleo’ are aimed at 20- to 25-year-olds and 15- to 18-year-olds read it.

P5: It probably says something about society really.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

It’s an annoying magazine because younger and younger girls are reading it and it’s mainly about annoyingly superficial things ie ‘how can I get him to like me?’

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10A

An interesting comment from this participant showed that parents had some impact on their choices:

P1: My mum ... grew up reading 'Dolly', which really scares me, but she never wanted me to read it, she always preferred 'Girlfriend' ... the 'Dolly' one was too open ... she was just like "Girlfriend's' better for you".

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The data show that the girls felt the reading of magazines was part of being a young person. As well as the commentary about the audience for magazines and the age of readers, there was an amount of critical comment about the ideas presented in magazines and how magazines connected to other forms of popular culture. The use of visual images on the cover was discussed as a marketing strategy, as shown in this excerpt:

R: What prompts you to buy a 'Frankie' over a 'Madison' or a 'Cleo' ...?

P1: Cover. I always look at the cover.

P2: Yeah.

P3: The stories that have inside.

P4: ... what's inside them.

P1: If you don't like the cover, you don't buy it.

P2: If you don't like what they've got written on the cover you don't buy it.

R: So what sells it ...?

P1: The person that's on the cover ... if I went down and I saw the main thing with Britney Spears on it, I wouldn't buy it.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The power of the visual images on the cover to sell a magazine was evident in the comment where the participant was using her opinion of a celebrity to inform her choice of purchase. The cover was an important prompt to purchase although it appeared to be more than just the image that informed the final decision. It was the stories inside that attracted these readers. The response to magazine content included observations that there were a limited range of common themes that could impact on self-esteem and there was critical comment on the perceived amount of untruth in the content, as the next excerpts illustrate:

R: What are the general themes about being girls that you see?

P1: They all have to have a boyfriend.

P3: Yeah, it's all like how to cope with break-ups and stuff.

P2: ... 'Girlfriend's' just like full of self-esteem stuff like saying that you're beautiful and all this stuff.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The contradiction between the articles and the images within the magazines concerned some of the girls, as they noted here:

P1: They talk about self-esteem but... all their models are ... size four.

P1: They tell you to love your body, but then everything in it is just small size, like an 8 or a 4.

P2: Even the clothes that they show, you can see that they're a smaller size.

P4: But I don't think being skinny is ... an issue as it used to be.

P5: We're all different sizes.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

However, one participant commented on the change in the images presented in printed media:

Models/celebrities are not caring as much about being super thin any more—saw some nice curvy bodies which is a first!

Journal log entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10C

However, the key messages identified in magazines were about self-esteem, success and fashion. Overall, the girls found them contradictory as the visual images presented with the articles still showed thin and beautiful girls. Relationships were also noted as a common theme reinforcing the message that everyone needed a partner, and that much of life was about finding someone. Printed media often featured the same people present in visual media, and the themes and messages from both forms of popular culture evoked responses in the girls in Years 10/11. Despite some critiquing of the material in the magazines it was evident that the girls all read a range of examples, while having a particular preference for some.

5.3.6 The Content of Popular Culture: Social Media

The final category of popular culture that featured heavily in the discussion was that of social media. No participant identified herself as not competent at accessing websites, contact points and social networking tools, and most appeared to use them regularly as part of their interaction with peers both locally and further away. In the focus group conversations the girls identified that they used a number of social media tools, including Twitter, Facebook, Bebo, MySpace and MSN, to communicate. They recognised that social media afforded them access to details of the lives of others, and that not everything was true.

P1: ... you can follow celebrities or your friends ...

P5: You can stalk them pretty much.

P3: You can, but a lot of them have fake material.

Focus group 1, School B, Year10

The girls also identified a downside to social media, as they found it a distraction that used a considerable amount of time.

P1: You say 'I'm not going to go on it but you know that you are ... on Google to look up stuff for assignments and... [you think] ... I'll go on Facebook and you just can't not do it.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

R: ... how much do you use Facebook?

P1: Every day.

P2: All the time.

P3: Like every afternoon.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P3: I love all these people, my friends on Facebook, plus my cousins who live in S you know and my cousin that lives in B ... you can be friends with anyone. ... you can catch up with people that went to your school.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Many sites and web locations were accessed by the participants regularly and for considerable periods of time. A chief purpose for interactions was communication with others. Virtual communication appeared to allow a freedom of expression and a connection not available face-to-face, although there was also a sense of lack of privacy, being stalked by followers, or questionable truths. Sometimes there was a sense of it being a distraction because of its accessibility. Other problems emerged as the conversation continued, as shown in the following excerpts:

R: Can you be a different person on Facebook to what you are in reality, even if they're people you see all the time?

P1: Not really ... you can see someone's personality in their Facebook ... and ... you can tell the annoying people who say all these pretentious things ...

R: Does it let people play a different role?

P1: It lets them kind of hide I guess ... mostly conflict now is over the Internet because you can just type it and you don't have to put on a brave face ... you can act more confident than you really would be when talking to someone.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The girls had realised that utilising social media to share aspects of their lives could be risky for later employment, as they talked about in this excerpt:

P1: I guess there is a danger, because ... if you have pictures on there of you drinking or smoking ... and ... a teacher sees them it's not a very good thing.

P2: It'd be more like if an employer saw them.

P4: ... employers go onto your MySpace and look at your pictures.

P2: Because people express more of themselves online ... they go to check up on that. Because what you write in a resume and what you say in an interview is what you want them to see, not how you really are.

P1: ... if you have photos on your Facebook ... and you don't know the person or the employer they judge you specifically on your photos or what you write about yourself.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The girls were able to identify that virtual communication allowed a level of freedom to represent yourself differently which was sometimes risky, but still allowed for personality to influence others. Of concern to the girls was the way that conflict was easier on Facebook, perhaps because you were removed from the face-to-face situation. The opportunity to be more confident than you actually were was also identified as a positive. Without virtual communication tools they suggested there would be more face-to-face interaction, although it was difficult to discern if this was considered a good or bad thing. The positive impact of virtual communication tools on the girls' lives was also noted in terms of relationships as the following excerpt shows:

P1: And you know people better because it takes more time ... you can get to know someone easier over the Internet and know their personality more than when you are at home ...

R: And it happens at different times ... it's between two people isn't it sometimes?

P1: ... it is kind of like a sense of community in a way ... on your home page you've got everyone there all together ... so it's kind of ... peer group thing.

R: Do you have people from lots of different places or do you only have the people that are here ...?

P1: Other people as well.

R: How do you get in contact with them?

P1: Facebook. Or it's just randoms that you met once who added to you and you've never spoken to since.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The fact that there were two levels of communication between friends through social networking tools was noted here. The participants reflected on the way that an individual might share online to create a sense of community. The connections spread beyond the school group to include others met in different places and this created a broad network of friends, including some who were quite random. Social networking sites extended the contact individuals had with each other, so that they were able to express themselves in different ways and were not only limited to face-to-face interactions. While this meant that some

individuals could represent themselves in different ways, it provided a community of friends with shared interests. The girls frequently used online tools concurrently with other activities, and maintained their contact with peers both locally and further away. They were a little wary of those they did not know well but also did not feel an urgent need to remove names they had included spontaneously. They were influenced in their thinking by what was said and shown online and also identified that who they are online can influence others, both in a good way and a poor way.

The girls interacted with popular culture media through visual, music, printed and social networking. They discussed each of these critically and identified concerns with the content, including information about appearance and behaviour, and the evidenced behaviour of some while interacting online. Despite identifying these issues with the content of popular culture they were most familiar with, the girls continued to engage with it, and by inference, felt it was important in their lives. They learned about themselves through learning about others.

5.3.7 The Characters in Popular Culture

The Year 10/11 girls spoke in familiar tones about the celebrities whose lives they saw in the media. They gave the impression that these were people they knew and who they held expectations for, expecting them to be responsible as role models. There was a boundary line of appropriate behaviour that they did not expect the celebrities to step over as shown in this comment:

P1: I just think they have too much money, especially the ones that are our age ... they just get too big in the head and they just do the drugs.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

This comment suggested that the participant did not see all celebrities as the best role models for young people. Conversely, though, there was also some concern for celebrities, and other comments indicated that, rather than envy the celebrity lifestyle, these girls felt that their lives lacked privacy and normality. In the following excerpt, they identified the pressures placed on celebrities by the media:

P4: ... they are famous and everyone looks at them all the time ... paparazzi and cameras ...

P3: ... they'd be even more pressured than us even though a lot of people perceive them as creating the pressure.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

While the girls were disparaging about Britney Spears, a documentary showing her life had been seen by some of them. The show stimulated some discussion about its production and the message it was conveying about the life of a popular culture identity. The following interactions are indicative of the way the girls were conscious of the person behind the popular culture image:

P2: I feel sorry for them.

P3: You know the show that was on Britney Spears? ... she was so scared she couldn't go anywhere without ... reporters following her.

P3: Because you think she's all happy because she's famous, but she's not.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

P4: Are celebrities really that different to us ... apart from ... their jobs, do they really think differently to us?

P3: They'd have the same problems. It's just that everyone knows them.

P2: ... I watch all the behind-the-scenes stuff and people talking ... it's totally normal ... Keira Knightley talking ... about something like we would.

P1: Exactly.

P3: Except it's on camera.

P4: Insecurities and problems at home ... still have the same issues ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

The pressure placed on celebrities by photographers and reporters, providing information for the audience who read popular culture, was described as unfair and an issue for celebrities. Because the girls felt that this explained some of the inappropriate behaviours of the celebrities, it evoked some sympathetic feelings, as shown below:

P3: I mean obviously we don't want to be obese and unhealthy ... you said that celebrities have a responsibility; they should be skinny, but why ...

P1: I think it would actually make more sense if they were expected to be ... healthy curvy ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

The pressure on the celebrities to meet an expectation was something that the girls felt made them unhappy about themselves, as this excerpt highlighted:

P1: But ... she is happy within herself and she is in the media and she is a celebrity ... she's in the same boat as anyone like Nicole Ritchie ... who's likes this stick, blonde ...

P2: Nicole Ritchie was a bad example—she's not happy with herself ...

P2: They're both happy with themselves or we presume they are happy with themselves ...

P4: That's what they portray.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Feeling happy with oneself appeared to be an attitude valued by the participants, and it was some of what made them feel that the celebrity life was not always wonderful. They felt that the hype in the media would not encourage anyone to aspire to be a celebrity. One of the contradictions identified for those in the public eye was the impact of public expectation on their lives. This added to the pressure that celebrities might feel.

P1: Everyone expects celebrities to be skinny coz they have enough money to afford a personal trainer ... they get so much attention then they should be skinny.

P2: That they owe it to us almost.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

Audience pressure might also typecast individuals into certain roles or ways to behave, and the girls felt that this created a challenge for celebrities and possible confusion for the audience. They particularly expressed concern when young children's television was part of a celebrity role, as this interaction demonstrated:

P: Are you saying that 'Play School's' guy was in some horror movie? ... It's horrible because he's such a nice dude and which I think is freaky ...

P: There's the 'High Five' chick who was being a model and stuff and it was a scandal.

P: ... it's their career, they're trying to improve their choices.

P: But I was sitting outside a newsagent and I was looking at, 'cause they have all the things there, and on that side is all the guys' magazines ... like 'Zoo' ... and then it was like, 'High Five's' presenter ...

P: That is sad, that is sad.

P: It's so wrong.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Critically, the girls were judging the celebrities based on common knowledge and opinion and blurring to a certain extent the real person with the roles they played in various shows. As the participants sometimes found it difficult to discern the reality from the performed role, there was an implication that, even when there was an awareness of the constructed nature of popular culture, and a capacity to critically discuss the messages sent, there remained the possibility that the audience would believe those messages.

They did consider that these mediated characters influenced their lives, as shown in the following comment stemming from a question about whether the characters they saw in popular culture influenced their thinking as much as their peers did:

P1: Kind of I guess ... on the Internet it's... the influence from your peers directly ... movies it's just completely a different group of people and a different set of circumstances ... it still influences you because it kind of relates to your life.

Interview, Year 10/11, School A, M&R

5.3.8 The Power of Popular Culture

The girls identified that popular culture was a way of gaining information about fashion, behaviour, responses and values, as this comment in the interview explained:

P1: ... it's almost like a guideline ... to be cool it's to follow this guideline of popular culture. So it's good now because there's more individuality within celebrities I guess and celebrities are supposedly the role models.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

P1: It tells you what's cool and what's not ... what the people on the TV like and things you kind of think ... mean ... I have to like it too ... whatever they do you kind of think that must be better and that must be the right thing to do.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The girls demonstrated awareness of the power of popular culture to manipulate the thinking of an audience, and acknowledged that they were influenced by it even as they were critical of its power. They noted that even when they understood the way it was constructed it still impacted on their thinking, as the following excerpt shows:

P2: And after doing it in school ... you sort of realise how manipulative it can be.

R: Do you think you get sucked into it ...?

P1: Absolutely.

P1: Because you can sit there and you can eat ... a McDonald's meal and then ... flick through a trashy magazine and ... you see the beautiful people and you're kind of like ... shouldn't have eaten that McDonald's meal.

P2: I think you feel that you'll be left behind ... if you didn't really buy all the clothes that you see in the magazines ... you're sort of like 'I can defy it as much as I want' but you feel like left out if you don't.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

They also described music videos as informative in terms of the clothes and hair styles you wore. The following excerpts alluded to the type of information they learned from their interaction with music videos:

P1: There's a lot of people like Lady Gaga for instance ... sort of a party culture. She dresses like the party culture ...

P2: It's dressed up but it's still having a bit of an effect on what people do ...

P3: Like there are heaps of sequined tops coming out now ...

P2: And sequined dresses ...

P4: Hey that's true!

P5: And the whole blonde bleached ...

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

The discussion about the clothing Lady Gaga wore identified that her appearance on video impacted on the choices individuals made in terms of their clothing. Popular culture informed them of the codes for behaviour, acting as an instructional tool for their choices to allow the viewer to fit in with the social world.

The participants expressed concern that popular culture sent messages about violence in people's lives. The following excerpt illustrated this:

P: Music and the words ... if you listen to really heavy metal, it affects the way you think ...

P: That's been proven too.

P: And the same as movies and what you watch.

P: And video games.

P: And ... gangster rap ...

P: 'Going to hit this bitch up'. And telling kids that this is what's happening in the world in the movies ...

P: And we've got no hope.

P: Some people who don't have the brains to solve the problem ... can't actually solve the problem, so they use violence.

P: This is the big thing. Teenage culture is, the way to solve a problem now is to get in a fight and girls do it so often and it's so ridiculous. It's disgusting, it's tacky, no one likes it, no one thinks better of you.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

It was evident in this excerpt that the amount of violence shown in popular culture concerned the Year 10/11 girls. They saw it as a lack of ability to problem-solve and that a key recent change was the frequent image of girls using violence against others. They responded to this

in a negative way, expressing concern at the way girls were represented. Relationships were often the motivating force behind the acts of violence. This contradicted other themes about relationships they noted in television or movies that they watched, as expressed below:

R: Is there still that sort of subtle message ... that one of the things you need to do is have a man or a partner?

P: I guess in romantic comedies and TV shows they kind of send that message but all the drama that goes along with it in those shows kind of goes the opposite way ... they're always so unhappy so it makes you wonder.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

Here the participant identified that popular culture suggested both positive and less positive ideas about relationships, and that this impacted on individuals. The girls felt that many movies sent a message to girls about the need for a partner, and that there was pressure to behave in certain ways to meet expectations, as this interaction highlighted:

P: One that I found that really irritated me so much, was 'He's just not that into you' ... it was an alright movie ... but the way that they just portrayed women as ...

P: Idiots, desperate?

P: Yeah, desperate women, just trying to find a husband ... that was ... the theme of the movie and it ran through the whole thing ... women have to find a husband and no matter how desperate they are, they will ... they were theorising about how women need a man to survive and will always need a man to survive and I just didn't think it was a very fair portrayal.

P: Yeah, like the movie that has just come out recently, 'The Ugly Truth', she was ... a successful, single person ... she changed herself ... into a bimbo. Like she wasn't one and then she changed herself to be one so that she could get a man and ... fit into society.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

While heterosexual relationships were the focus of many movie themes, the girls had also noticed that homosexual relationships featured in some television shows, and also raised some concerns. The following excerpt highlighted their knowledge and awareness of different sexualities within their lives:

P: And they had to share a room. The other guy was straight. This guy was gay. I found that completely wrong. I would not do that to a kid. Like, one was gay, one was straight.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11

While there was openness towards different sexualities, within the longer discussion there was a concern about the message in the show that placed the two characters in the same space overnight. It is also evident that the girls identified closely with the issue and were responding to it in a reactive way. The critical response to the message demonstrated that while these Year 10/11 girls had formed their own opinions, questioned the purpose of the

episode and expressed different views to the one shown, they did not remember that the episode had been intentionally constructed to evoke a response.

The girls were also able to recognise that sometimes the messages delivered by popular culture were positive, and supported girls to grow in self-esteem and confidence. The following excerpt focused on the power of ‘Glee’, a television series, to give a message to the audience about accepted behaviours or responses.

P: I reckon that story with Mercedes ... she’s a big girl and she is an African-American girl.

P: And she started to lose weight ... do that liquid diet ... and this girl comes up ... ‘You were okay with your body before. Why do you want to change now?’ ...

P: ‘Glee’s’ the one show that really does that because it’s trying to make kids feel better about themselves.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&G

Using popular culture to send messages to adolescents through shows that related to their self-esteem was something the girls identified as a positive feature of some shows on television. The fact that popular culture actually influenced young people was also recognised. These Year 10/11 girls believed that visual media had an impact on how girls saw and felt about themselves, responded to the impact of visual media popular culture images on self-esteem and recognised that it was an important source of information for adolescent girls.

5.3.9 The Influence of Popular Culture

While the conversation with the Year 10/11 girls showed them to be articulate and thoughtful about their interactions with popular culture it also highlighted that they were influenced by the ideas and images encountered. They were both able, and not able, to recognise this influence. They sometimes contradicted themselves when talking about their independent thinking when they connected their choices with something they had read or seen. The following excerpt focused on the ways they were influenced by the various media sources of information:

P1: You’re shown Barbies from a really young age ... the perfect figure, perfect hair, perfect house and the mansions ... you just grow up thinking that’s how it is.

P3: As you get older you realise that’s not how it is, that’s not reality.

P1: It’s not like that.

P3: I think it sort of starts of when you see them with all the nice clothes that you want, 'If I had a lot of money and I was like her I could have all those clothes', but the older you get you sort of realise it's not how everyone in the world lives ... it's not really reality.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The girls sometimes spoke about celebrities as if they were characters, blurring the divide between reality and the fiction of popular culture. They noted that the real lives of the people in popular culture were as important, and shown as often, as their fictional roles. In the following interactions they discussed the influence of the people in popular culture:

R: What about the people that are in movies? ... magazines show celebrities and things like that ... do they influence what you do?

P1: What you wear.

P1: Not what you do.

P3: Probably not how you act, coz they're usually stupid.

P2: They're called actors for a reason.

P4: But I guess if you're younger you tend to idolise them, so ...

P1: Like the whole Miley Cyrus thing.

P4: Yeah, 'Hannah Montana', thing.

R: So you did when you were younger but you don't now?

P4: Yeah. I really couldn't care less now.

P2: I mean maybe what they wear but it doesn't mean you're going to go and act like them.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The girls were influenced by popular culture as they made decisions about clothing, although there was still space to be individual when choosing outfits. By inference, these older girls felt that younger girls were more susceptible to influences from popular culture. The following quote encapsulated the way these girls responded to the images in popular culture around fashion and choices:

It tells you what's cool and what's not, kind of, what the people on the TV like and things. You kind of think that must mean that I have to like it too ... whatever they do you kind of think that must be better and that must be the right thing to do.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

While this statement alluded to a non-critical response to popular culture, other conversation indicated a capacity to view the images with a critical response rather than the simple acceptance illustrated above:

- R: Do you think the image ... of 16-year-olds ... is ...a real image of 16-year-olds?
- P2: No, because they make us look 10 years older.
- P1: Yeah, and they have all these resources ... so much money to spend on whatever they want ... so much time to make themselves look pretty ...
- R: Do you watch it aware of that or do you watch it and it's only when you think about it later that you think, no, that couldn't be true?
- P1: Kind of both ... you know that that's not true ... it's a movie ... and it wouldn't be a movie if they couldn't make it interesting ... if they made it like a real day in the life of school girls it would be the most boring movie ever ...
- Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The excerpt showed some concern that the misrepresentation of the adolescent years tended to show school girls as much older and well-resourced, with control of their lives. The participants indicated that it was a choice to believe popular culture or not. There was some sense that the teenage girls they saw in popular culture were strong and independent, which contradicted earlier comments about the need to be in a relationship to be successful, as described in the following excerpt:

- P1: ... most of the girls in those movies ... they're all strong and independent ... not ... all dumb and ditzy and rely on the men to do their work for them ... in most of those movies the girls ... do it themselves and they have the power over the guys so it's kind of a feminism thing.
- Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

For these girls, the message of girl power remained evident in popular culture, through strong and independent girl characters. This comment reflected the mixed messages that the girls appeared to be getting from popular culture about being a girl. Popular culture images also suggested that having a relationship was crucial. While female characters and celebrities modelled independent and confident behaviour, they also met stereotyped expectations of physical appearance and apparel. Popular culture had the power to establish trends and direct actions, even as the girls were aware that it was a constructed image. The girls in the research project could articulate that they recognised this, while also making it clear that they responded to it and followed its guidance, as highlighted below:

- R: So when you look at what they wear do you then go and find it, so you can ... dress yourself like those people?
- P2: No. It's sort of like, take ...
- P1: Ideas.
- P3: Take it in your head the next time you go shopping ... I saw that on ... maybe that'll look good together.
- P2: ... if they're wearing ... a jacket with a dress or something that looks cool you can buy one that's the same style...

P4: You take the idea in.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

They identified that some girls were more influenced than others, but that girls were becoming increasingly able to critically consider what they were seeing and what was appropriate for physical appearance and body image. Being thin continued to be an important aspect of a girl's life, even though they noted magazines that were changing the images presented:

P: ... in magazines, a while ago there was the fashion show with the size 16 and size 18 women and they were modelling all these new clothes.

P: Even 'Harpers Bazaar' and 'Vogue' ... are getting onto it ... it's been a long time coming. Because if you look back at Australian magazines, oh, 'Dolly', 'Girlfriend' ... how many years have they been trying to enforce into us that a thin shape is good?

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

However, some of the girls felt that popular culture continued to put pressure on girls in terms of their appearance, challenging their self-image, as this comment indicated:

R: Does popular culture change how you see yourselves?

P: To an extent. I mean, people call me pretty skinny but then you look at other girls and I think, 'No, compare me to them in the magazine and I'm not'. It doesn't always make you feel good about yourself. It makes you feel pretty bad about yourself.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

They noticed that there were times when the producers of media were selective in deciding to support individuals or not, and that sometimes celebrities lost their appeal to the media. For other celebrities, the focus could lead to major lifestyle changes, although in the next excerpt they did not identify that Magda Szubanski was, in fact, providing publicity and a form of advertising for a diet business.

P: But the thing is that they support some people. So who was it that just lost so much weight?

P: That big fat chick?

P: Magda Szubanski.

P: I think this is the good point where it was a lifestyle change ... she couldn't do what she wanted to do and she has gone into a healthier range ...

P: Yeah and she's still curvy.

P: ... and she's a size 16 or 14 or something.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

Their understanding of the way to be healthy influenced their responses to individuals, as expressed in the journal entry of one participant from School A, quoted below:

I think a lot of teen girls these days are mature enough to understand model slim bodies are both unrealistic and unhealthy. For this reason the celebrity whose body I admire is the people like Scarlet Johanssen and Jennifer Love Hewitt, the people who have a realistic body shape and are still seen as beautiful because they embrace their curves and figures. Celebrities I do not admire are the Lindsay Lohan's of the industry who use their money and influences to ruin themselves.

Journal entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10B

A further description of an ideal girl as a role model was shown as the participant described her ideal woman in the following comment:

P: ... a size with curves and who had boobs and ... hips and ... a bit of extra love handle ... or wasn't this anorexic little girl that everyone is like. I would make her ... have sort of a good sense of humour and be able to laugh at herself and be fun and a happy person to be around. And she hasn't got a perfect little life ... but she's ... still happy and ... happy within herself and she has the intelligence and drive to work harder and motivate herself to do what she wants to do, even though she might not come from this perfect, happy and lots of money, perfect little background.

Focus group 3 School A, Year 10/11

When describing their popular culture idols, the girls did not define them as gifted, but rather as celebrities whose lives they knew about and who regularly appeared in magazines, television shows and movies. As the girls talked about the girls they knew from popular culture they did not distinguish between them as gifted or non-gifted girls. In later conversation, the focus moved to the women in popular culture who they identified as gifted, or who they felt had been created to represent gifted individuals.

5.3.10 Women in Popular Culture

The girls were able to identify women in popular culture who they admired, without always giving a strong reason for the admiration. Women such as Audrey Hepburn, Emma Watson, Marilyn Monroe, Scarlet Johanssen, Coco Chanel and Jennifer Love Hewitt were all mentioned at various times as living their lives in admirable ways. They were listed because the girls felt they were able to manage their lives, to stand up for their beliefs and not always follow the trends as dictated by popular culture. Sometimes they were trend setters. Women they did not admire included Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton, Miley Cyrus and the Kardashian girls—these were women who sought publicity or did not make sensible choices in their lives. These names all appeared consistently across the focus groups, interviews and journal entries.

These gifted girls felt that popular culture did not necessarily portray a true picture of real women, but that the images tended to show women who were not as intelligent as males and not interested in being involved in a career. In the following excerpt they discussed the presentation of women in popular culture:

R: When you said that they always show women as dumb, how do they show women as dumb?

P: Because all they ... care about is the material things.

P: In every movie.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

In 'The Devil Wears Prada', they noticed that the character played by Anne Hathaway (Andy Sachs) felt pressured to change her appearance and behaviours to meet expectations in the movie, as described in the excerpt:

P: They show her transformation from the girl that comes into work, the everyday girl who wears a sweater ... and then she changes into this typical stereotyped fashion person.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 10/11

It was of concern to them that the image of women was not the same as the image portrayed of men. The concept of women actively engaging in worthwhile careers was not presented in popular culture, as they explained below:

P: In a lot of cases, women are shown as the ones that stay home ... in heaps and heaps of movies but recently ... there have been more important movies for women.

P: They are still kind of portrayed as dumb though.

P: Yeah they are.

P: They are still into fashion and like, 'Oh my boyfriend'.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

They noted that women were usually portrayed as having roles that were related to family but noted recent trends away from this image, although they did not elaborate or give examples. In the interviews, the girls talked about how their experiences led them to see the similarities between males and females, partly supported by the knowledge they have gained about males from popular culture, as explained in this interaction:

R: Do you think the popular culture supports the cause of feminism?

P4: I think it's at war with each other, there's two opposing sides and they're constantly at war.

P5: ... in regards to specifically feminism, I think that these days ... females and males, we have grown a lot more alike in terms of style ...

- P4: Which is not half scary.
- P5: ... and the way we act even ... guys' minds work so much differently to girls ... I've spent so much time in the last six months with a group of guys who are ... my best friends because I was in a band with them ... I've just realised how similar girls and guys have actually gotten because of what popular culture has led it to believe ... everything's unisex, it's all based around the fact that girls and guys can be similar and like still be accepted.
- P4: They're not total aliens to each other which back in the 20s, 30s, maybe 50s it was, they were aliens, they didn't know anything about each other. Mainly due to not having sex before marriage ... women have more freedom with their sexuality and so have males, they've come to understand a lot more about each other.
- P3: We interact more ... in the 50s men and women hardly spoke to each other, they stood on the other side of the dance floor.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Despite increased similarities in real life, the continued message in popular culture was still that women needed to focus on appearance and relationships and needed to change themselves to meet society's expectations. This remained clear to the girls. They also noticed that women were sometimes still used as ornaments to sell products, using their bodies and appearance as an attractor, as described in this excerpt:

- P: Did you see that mining ad?
- P: They're all ... they put oil on them and there's a couple of guys but it's mainly girls ... wearing hard hats ...
- P: ... it's sexist ... this ad that's really, really sexist.
- R: Do you think they did that for effect though?
- P: Yeah, because you're going to remember it.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

The girls continued to describe a series of advertisements where the woman is shown to be hedonistic and the male to be the observer or 'victim'. They spoke about these advertisements as humorous but it was clear they had noticed the preponderance of females as the key character in them. The following excerpt highlights this view:

- P: And there's another one where there's a girl sitting there ... she's got this girl on her arm and she's gay. And she goes 'guys just don't do it for me' and it says The Dilemma ...
- R: So what message do you think that gives society though, when they use women in these sorts of ways, is it what happens to women?

- P: You don't see ads with people like M on them ... with normal people.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

The final comment indicated that they were critically aware of the discrepancies between real life and the world of popular culture and that they felt the messages about women and what women can do, were not always appropriate. Other comments indicated that they believed the media suggested ways of women being, informing them of socially acceptable behaviours, but also changing the way women saw themselves. The fact that popular culture could impact on girls' choices and behaviour was attributed to the fact that girls, unlike men, tended to respond to the opinions of others, as indicated below:

- P: ... women are so self-conscious and [ask] 'What are people going to think of me if I do this? What do I look like in these clothes?' ... if you said to your friends, 'I'm going to be a brickie' ... they'd [say] 'You'll have tough hands and get dirty' ... people would go ... 'Well let's look down on you'. You'd be a labourer.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

- P: I agree that girls probably do respond more to what other people think of them because, with guys, they spit and grunt and get filth all over their face ...
- P: ... they don't care about what people think of them ... after a soccer game ...
- P: They're sweaty and dirty and muddy and gross ...
- P: ... girls have to go home and wash their hair and make sure they're fine to go out.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

One of the aspects of popular culture representations of girls they did not like was the way that women were presented as manipulative with other people. They had noticed that in many shows, there was an underlying agenda to the actions and decisions of many women, as described in this comment in one of the interviews:

- P1: ... in most TV shows like 'Gossip Girl', 'Desperate Housewives', women are ... not very nice and they always have an agenda ... never do anything just for no reason ... it's always because we want something out of it.

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

As well, while they had identified an increase in violence in society overall, one of the concerns the girls expressed was that girls were becoming more violent towards each other, and they felt that this was a message from popular culture, where girls often used violence to resolve conflict. The interaction below explored this idea in some depth:

- P: In high school movies there's so many ... bash-ups ... girls rip each other's hair out and ... all the people standing round ... clapping and cheering them on ... That's what happens in so many movies that it's ridiculous.
- P: ... girls have this mentality that guys will like them, or that they're impressing them ... if they're tough.
- P: A guy'll ... bash somebody and then ... she took away my manliness, I haven't fought anyone, why does she?

- P: Do guys actually like that though, do they like the idea that girls fight for them?
- P: They're really taking on the power of the role of them in bashing people.
- P: ... girl fights are just so incredibly tacky ...
- P: The dispute goes on after that and stretches out and then it might happen again ... girls can't just get over something straight away.
- P: That's also why girls talk stuff out if they're ... upset ... they find a friend and bitch ... because they don't have somewhere in their brains ... to file away their problems, but guys do, they have a specific part of their brains that they just put stuff away and ignore it.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

One participant reflected on the connection between increased violence and feminism, as this excerpt shows:

- P: I was thinking ... you know how women ... fought to get all their rights because men had all the jobs ... perhaps in this whole change ... women are getting all this power and same money and equality and same rights ... they sort of think ... why can't women be the same as guys ... in this whole fight for independence and ... for equality ... guys are beating each other up ... why can't we?

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Further exploration of the concept highlighted that while they felt that popular culture had considerable influence on its audience, it worked in concert with other influences in an adolescent's life.

- P: I think it's actually ... more back to the parents ... people ... say people from violent homes tend to be a lot more violent and I think that's true.
- R: So you don't think it's from television and watching movies?
- P: I think it's a little bit of it and it's ... more expected ... or accepted people do it.
- P: But you spend more time with your parents than with the TV. And when you think of the TV and all those ideas ... the very first habits you take on are your parents' habits. They teach you how to differentiate right from wrong, but I think what movies are doing is telling us, 'Well, this is okay' ... we do have that from our background, you know this is a barrier, we don't cross that, enough is enough, but some people just take it too far.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

These adolescent gifted girls were grappling with the contradictory images and messages that popular culture presented of women to its adolescent audience, alongside different messages from other influences in their lives. This sometimes meant that while they were able to cognitively deal with popular culture, their emotional responses did not always align. The data reflected an asynchrony in their cognitive and emotive response to popular culture.

5.4 Giftedness

5.4.1 The Meaning of Giftedness

Despite the girls only recently beginning to think of themselves as gifted, they were able to articulate some understandings of the terms gifted and talented. In the first focus group I was less direct in asking them about giftedness, intentionally, to build the relationship and allow them to talk more generally. The following comments highlighted that while they did not entirely feel comfortable with the label, they agreed that they fitted the category:

- P: I don't like the title gifted and talented.
- P: It's embarrassing, in roll call they read it out.
- P: Talented sounds like sort of like code name or something.
- P: It's not something you like to hear in roll calls.
- R: So why is it embarrassing?
- P: I wouldn't go ... to embarrassing, I probably [mean] ... uncomfortable.
- P: ... I don't know what you call it ... I'm not embarrassed that I'm the way that I am.
- P: I'm not embarrassed that I'm gifted ... I feel that it is me, but ... others resent it because they want to be like you.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

The interview conversations confirmed that the girls had been aware of their own ability, and that of others around them for much of their school life, and that they felt they had been recognised in this way at school, without a label, as the following conversation showed:

- R: What about the view of yourself as an intelligent person ... would you have put yourself in ... a group of gifted girls ...?
- P: [Laughter] Yeah, we've sort of been told since we were ... younger ... including in academic programs ... since Year 6 ...
- R: ... Were you surprised by the people in the room?
- P: Not really, they're the people ... we've always known that they're fairly intelligent ...
- P: And when you think about conversations with everybody ... fairly intelligent ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Even though they may not have thought of themselves in this way before, they had noticed others at school who they would label gifted, as identified in the comment below:

- P: ... he's good at everything, he ... gets out there on the soccer field, plays and then comes in to music, he just plays away ...
- P: I know, and then he just aces all his tests and he doesn't ... study because all he's ever doing is soccer training ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

It was interesting that in other comments as well as those quoted, it was boys who were identified with specific areas of talent. In the second focus group, the question “What does it mean to be gifted?” was asked explicitly and during the interviews, it was addressed further. The girls were open to exploring the concept and the following excerpt provides an insight into their understanding of giftedness:

- P: I think the term gifted is stupid.
- P: ... when you hear it, you think that they're gifted at something ...
- P: ... they can be gifted at art or whatever it is, it's not ... special powers ...
- P: ... it's a talent that's come to you naturally.
- P: I don't think any talents come to people naturally. I think that everyone has to work at some way to get where they are even if they work through it very quickly ...
- P: But some people are always going to be naturally smarter than others ...
- P: 'Cause of their genes.
- Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Even though the girls identified giftedness as being an inherited capacity, they also talked about gifted individuals still needing to work hard to achieve in school. Some of these girls put in considerable effort to be successful at school, and this excerpt highlighted that not everyone knew that they did, and that doing well was something they aspired to:

- R: Is that a misconception that because you're clever at school, you don't need to do any school work ...?
- P: I have to do it to get where I am.
- P: Some people just seem to breeze by ... doing no work at all ...
- Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

- P: I get called a nerd just because I study and no one else does like in my class. So they [say] ... you're a nerd and why do you study and ... I need to because otherwise I wouldn't be in the class.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

As well as something that had to be worked at, there was a sense that opportunities had contributed to giftedness, and that parents had an influence on the giftedness demonstrated.

- P: ... we are given the opportunities by our parents.
- P: Exactly, it's your parents' influence.
- P: They have those dreams and aspirations ... I did gymnastics and I went really far ... I did dancing ... I've always done lots of sports and that's led me to pathways and careers ... I've always done my own thing, but it is our parents ...
- P: Influence.

P: ... they encourage us to do different things.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The girls defined the meaning of talented, and how they would recognise it in someone, as shown in the following conversation:

P: Their aura.

P: ... if ... someone's really ...

P: Good.

P: Yeah, you can tell just by watching them ...

P: They have a certain way of doing ...

P: Yeah they have certain ... aura about them.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

Their conversation reflected that they defined giftedness as being recognised when an individual was good at many tasks and able to perform to a high standard, but something that could also be defined as mysterious. It was not without some angst though, as this excerpt showed:

P: ... what they say about ignorance and it's bliss ... they're not half wrong. ... smart people ... view the world and they know what people are like. It sucks, because people suck. I just think it would be a lot easier if ... I was a bit more obtuse, I'd actually enjoy it I think.

P: Still you wouldn't enjoy the school work.

P: Yeah but I don't enjoy the school work now.

P: ... you would hate it even more because you don't know how to do it.

P: What do you mean ... common sense smart? Just general knowledge ...?

P: No I'm talking about ... knowing what people are like, and ... more of the world in general ... people who are ignorant, they don't really have to think about that.

P: But they see such a duller world than we do. I bet all of us have so many hopes and aspirations as to what to do and how to go in life and people like that ... but they can't particularly see themselves leaving here or going to uni ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

One participant in particular was very clear about what she understood about ability and intelligence. She could clearly articulate that it was both a positive and a negative phenomenon, as her description highlighted:

P: ... intelligence ... it's a very sort of broad sort of a word ... there are so many different types of intelligence and ... different ways you can be smart ... you might have a science brain and a maths brain and that's the way you think, but you could have a really creative brain or you could do something completely different ... your brain's perceptive and you pick up on what people say and ... how people say things ... people in general ... It's like perceptive feelings I guess. We're all up on things in the world and then there's ... people who are academically smart but so silly, inept.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

When the girls spoke about prodigies, who they had learned of through the media or popular culture, there was also a sense that it was a difficult way to be. The discussion below showed that they did have a stereotyped conceptualisation of gifted individuals, but also an awareness of the impact of such a high level of ability:

- P: What about, what do you call like music maestros ...
- P: Prodigies.
- P: The kid prodigies ... their brains are different to ours ...
- P: They are different.
- P: People who are like maestro piano players, but they don't speak ... It's not that they're stupid, it's just that they're different. They're gifted at one thing.
- P: Maybe that giftedness takes away from everything else ... it sucks away your social life.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Further interactions demonstrated that they were aware of individuals who were highly able, but who did not achieve or use their ability appropriately, as the following description of boys known to the girls showed:

- P: He doesn't use it because of what other people would think, so he just acts stupid ... instead of using his brains and being himself ... he doesn't know how to be himself and let other people accept him.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

In response to the question, "What does giftedness mean?", the following interaction highlighted that they could recognise when an individual did not reach their potential:

- P: ... he's pretty smart, he's cluey.
- P: But he just doesn't use his intelligence. He just mucks up tests and makes it a big joke ...
- P: It's like school's a joke to him.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

In the following excerpt, the participants make it make it clear that, when school work is considered, being gifted could be seen as helpful for success. Working closely with others when in a relationship highlighted the differences:

- P: MH and I, we're very different in intelligence wise ... I see him stress over all the school work ...
- P: But I explain things to him and I'm sort of glad that I can actually know and I understand ... it takes a layer of stress off my shoulders. I actually get this ... seeing other people stressing ... I'm so glad that I don't actually have to ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

The girls at School B were also aware of the differences between individuals, noting that those in the top academic classes appeared more committed to their education, and that their ability gave them more opportunities.

P2: ... a lot of the girls in our year tend to go out on weekends and ... not concentrate ... on school work ... they couldn't care less ... some of us ... do also make the effort in the school work

P3: I think we think about our choices more sometimes, I think about balancing ... we have to do assignments, because we want to go to Year 12 and uni ... other girls ... that's not important to them at all ...

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

The interviews confirmed that the girls had been aware of their ability prior to being identified and that other girls in their school recognised the difference as well. When the responses of their peers to their achievement in school work were talked about in the focus groups, the participants considered that other girls were not as interested in achieving well at school, and prioritised their social activities around *friends, drinking, boys* (Participant, Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11). A key difference that the group participants noticed between themselves and their less able peers was the attitude to the academic environment of school. In a journal entry, one participant expressed awareness of the level of thinking in those in her school community:

The school's wider community has an incredibly small-minded mentality.

Journal entry, School A, Year 10/11, A10D

Although this comment gave no further detail, it indicated that she had noticed differences between her thinking and that of others in her cohort.

When talking about school, the girls felt that teachers treated them differently to the other girls, providing opportunities, support, and feedback that encouraged them to maintain their effort. This excerpt indicated that the girls felt that the teachers cared more about their efforts and results in school work than other girls:

R: ... do teachers treat you differently?

P: Teachers do more.

P: ... if you don't do well in a test or an assignment, they seem pretty disappointed.

P: They'd say, 'Oh, I expected you to do better on this' and you're like ... come on this person gets that much and you don't give a damn, I got more than them.

P: I think they definitely expect more.

P: They taught me more and they take more into account of what you do and they care more about what you do I think.

P: Yeah, they do care about what you're doing.

P: Well some give you more work ... or they offer things to you that they probably wouldn't offer other students because ... you appreciate it.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

A reflection of their positive relationships with at least some of their teachers was their response to the question, "Is it a good thing to be smart at school?"

P: I think it is, yeah.

P: If you want to get somewhere in life.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

R: Is it good being a smarter person in a school setting?

P2: It's easier ... because you know the ins and outs of a lot of things.

P2: And I guess it's nice to get good results ... it's not very nice when you don't do well in something. So it's probably nice to get good results I guess.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The girls had also noticed that being smart was harder for boys than girls, because of stereotyped expectations of behaviour and interest (*There is so much more pressure because boys are stereotypically the people that play sport, that don't really have to care about school.* Participant, Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11). This observation was confirmed and extended in the interviews when the participants noted that girls tended to perform better at school than boys, due in part to the increased pressure put on boys by their peers, as indicated in this excerpt:

P1: Girls would probably do better than boys in most of my classes anyway.

P2: Boys, if they're really smart they're seen like you're a nerd and gay and all that.

P1: It's more acceptable for a girl to be really smart than for a boy to be really smart ... most of those do get ... 'you're gay' ...

Interview, School B. Year 10/11, M&R

Friendship groups for the girls included others with a range of ability levels, although they noted that this sometimes left them feeling uncomfortable about showing their ability, and changed their behavior, as described in this comment:

P1: I feel crap sometimes knowing I do better than ... my best friend, I feel bad saying that I got good and then that person goes 'I got a bad mark'. It depends on how hard they tried ... if they're someone who's studied really hard and tried their best and still just couldn't get it then it feels bad.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11. M&R

These were girls who had found friends from a range of different groups and who enjoyed the differences between people as indicated in the following excerpt where the girls at School A were discussing the way the focus group had interacted in the first session:

- P1: ... there's a lot of different people. We're not exactly all alike.
P2: Even if we are in the same group ... none of us are similar.

P3: If we were all the same ... it'd be pretty boring.
P4: And I think that talking about something like this that's all so common in all our lives, it doesn't matter like how different you are.
P5: Coz your differences make up the conversation.
Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

5.4.2 Influences on Girls

The girls identified a number of sources of influence—their families, friends and teachers. While none of these were unexpected, for most of these girls, family was both a considerable influence and something to fight against. Family members were listeners, supporters and models and influenced the girls more than television, as they explained in the interaction below:

- R: Who are the people that most influence you?
P: I think your parents influence how you behave and ... how you think ...

P: I think it is the closest people we have to us.

P: It's not necessarily what we see on TV because we all know ... it's kind of rubbish, but it's ... the opinions of the people that are really close that matters and dictate how we act and what we do and what we wear and what we look like ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

At School B there was a discussion about a participant's sister, who obviously was known to the other girls and greatly admired. She provided a role model for some of the girls in the group. The story of this girl was an important example of an influence for these girls, as illustrated in the excerpt:

- P: When my sister was ten years older than me, she was married and had three kids ...
R: Did she want to do other things?
P: I don't know, she got married at 23 ... we'd been brought up into a culture that gets married ... I don't think she wanted to do anything else.
P: But she's travelled and she's studied ...
P: She's done so much in her life, yeah.

- R: But did she go onto uni and do any further education?
- P: She'd finished her uni before that, she did a course in sewing and ... she did a course in accounting and she was an accountant for two years ...she left in Year 10 so that gave her a lot more time. And so she now owns a business ...
- R: So she's actually managing family and business?
- P: Which never ceases to amaze me.
- P: She's just cool, I admire her so much ...
- Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

It was clear from the conversation that the elder sister impacted on all the girls who knew her. Some of the girls did not agree with the discussion about parental influence and the following excerpt identifies that their relationship with their parents was not as positive:

- R: So would your parents be a stronger influence on you ... than your peers?
- P: I think some wouldn't give stuff what their parents say. I do.
- P: I only do because I get grounded.
- P: You take it into account.
- P: Yeah, because they've been around and they know.
- P: Wise.
- P: You always have to think that they're from a different generation so they see it differently ... my parents are older ... they think I should do things for my brothers and they have to do nothing and I hate that.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Sometimes though, their family's attitudes embarrassed them or were markedly different to their values:

- R: Are there things that you openly disagree with them, in terms of values?
- P: I'm not as racist as my father.
- P: ... he gets these jokes. He's a truck driver and so he gets all these messages and jokes ... some of them are racist ... And sometimes I don't agree with them. But it's his way, I guess. ... he tends to stereotype ...

Interview, School B, Year 10/11, M&R

They wanted the chance to make their own mistakes, and learn from them:

- P: I think by ... about 16 or 17 the people who haven't learnt through their mistakes, they realise these things aren't going to work ... you have to work out your own mistakes and parents do try their best to tell you ... You've got to work it out yourself.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

This participant in the following excerpt identified that, while her parents had an impact on her choices, she was more influenced by her friends:

P: ... your parents have an impact on you ... with me ... I like to please them with the school thing ... with my friends they have a big influence on me, if you know what I mean with ... who I am and all that sort of thing.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Friends and boyfriends were also described by the girls as influential, as they encouraged them to persist. In response to a question asking what prevents them giving up, the following comments reflect the influences:

P: Friendship ... my family ... my friends ... how they make me feel I suppose.

P: It is my boyfriend or someone like that.

P: They encourage you, yeah.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

Sometimes there was a need to resist peer pressure though and to have a clear personal stance on issues. The girls felt that their intelligence enabled them to resist peer pressure, as described in the following interview excerpt:

R: ... if you decided that you weren't going to drink at all would you be able to stand your ground?

P1: I think so.

P2: Well if I really believed it I guess.

P1: There'd probably be a lot of pressure, especially underage drinking, but I guess I could, it just depends.

R: Do you think that's a thing related to intelligence?

P1: Probably.

R: Because?

P1: The less intelligent people probably cave to peer pressure a lot easier and they can probably be won over, not that I'm being mean but it doesn't take as much to tell them what to do.

P2: Whereas a smarter person they'd have more sense of ... the outcome ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

When making major decisions the girls noted that it was their parents to whom they spoke first, followed by other family and then close friends. Being close to siblings was a way to receive current advice and think through decisions, as described below:

R: So when you go to make a major decision ... something beyond what you're going to wear ... who do you talk to?

P: Parents.

P: Parents and family.

P: And then your friends and significant others ... siblings, girlfriends, boyfriends.

- P: And they've got to have done the courses or the subject too to talk in that sense.
- P: I talk to my sister ... she just finished Year 12, so she knows ... the subjects and what all her friends did and what they liked ...
- P: I talk to my sister ... but I never talk to my parents ... because... they're all science and maths people and I'm just not, so any conversation just goes bad ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

- P: ... your friends too, they really influence you and influence your opinions ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Career advice and information from parents was not always helpful, as the girls noted in the following interaction:

- P: ... parents can sometimes stop you 'cause you know you've gotta be disciplined ...
- P: ... they can have a specific vision for you.
- P: My mum wanted to do like pharmacy ... to be a chemist ...and her parents said no. They wouldn't pay for it.
- R: Do you think that's changed now though?
- P: Yeah, like your parents respect your decisions a lot more ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

However, these girls also found that teachers were able to advise them on their choices in study and learning, because they had known them for a long time. Because school appeared to be a supportive for these girls, they felt comfortable talking to teachers about their future, as noted in the following excerpts:

- P: And talking to your teachers about ... what they think ... they know your strengths and your weaknesses and what you'd be good at and what you could achieve well in ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

- R: Do you feel pressured to follow a pathway sometimes?
- P: I think that a good teacher will take into account your opinions as well as what they believe you could do well at ... they're really good at this, but will they enjoy this and you know they are interested in class, and actually have a talk to the student about ... what they want to do and ... give them advice and I think that would make a good teacher.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Not every teacher helped the girls to learn, and the girls felt that having a good relationship with their teachers and feeling comfortable to ask questions influenced their achievements, as noted below:

- P: You need to find people that you relate to and especially important with teachers. If you don't have that relationship where you feel that you can't ask them something or can't talk to them, then you're lost.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

5.4.3 Relationships with Boys

While it was evident that these Year 10/11 girls had had relationships with boys, they were not all currently in a relationship and they often talked about boys as platonic friends or classmates/workmates. In particular they talked about the experience of working and relating to males in the work situation. Common or shared knowledge built friendships with boys, and respect was the element that maintained it. These real life relationships did not appear to reflect the relationships they described in popular culture. In the next excerpt, a participant described how she found that her interest in motorbikes helped in friendships:

P: ... you have to have something in common with boys. I find it easier to become friends with a boy if I talk to them about motorbikes ... because I have a motorbike and then that will lead to another thing ... it becomes easier for you to talk to them but you need to start off with something that's more related to them—you can't just go, I got my hair done yesterday.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

The girls had had different experiences with boys, from working with them to having personal relationships, and they shared ideas about socialising with them. They described finding it easier sometimes to socialise with boys rather than girls because boys were less bitchy. They felt safe interacting with boys and experienced strong friendships (*...some of my guy friends are my best friends...* Participant, Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11). As gifted adolescents, these girls enjoyed diverse relationships with a mixture of people in their lives, and these relationships supported their sense of self and their confidence in demonstrating their ability.

5.4.4 Responding to Being Gifted

Much of the conversation about what it was like to be gifted did not specifically refer to the girls' giftedness, but was focused on who they were influenced by, their experiences in school and their capacity for achieving in school work. In doing this, they clearly presented a picture of the lived experience of being a gifted adolescent girl in a regional setting. Their lives revolved around their family and friends, and they had experiences working and interacting with a range of people of diverse ages. School was not a difficult place as they felt supported by the teachers they respected, and were able to complete the work set with little trouble. However, some of the girls noted that they worked hard, and that this was one way

they were different to other girls in their year. These girls valued their school work and aimed to achieve the clear goals they had for further learning or career pathways.

They wanted to be successful in their school work and expected to do well in school. In this interview conversation, the participants indicated that when they did not do as well as expected, they looked at their own behaviours and actions to explain the result:

R: If you don't do well at a test or in an assignment how do you react?

P2: At first I'll be like I don't really care but then deep down I'll be like shit.

R: Where do you lay the blame?

P2: Myself.

P1: Yeah myself.

P2: ... leaving it to the last moment to study ...

R: So you look at how you went about it and say well this is the reason ...?

P1: Usually I'm on the Internet instead of studying ... bad results are because of the Internet.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11. M&R

Being identified as gifted was a new concept for these girls, although they had been aware of their ability and were able to identify opportunities offered because of their ability. These gifted girls were sensitive to the changes in societal expectation for women over time, and noted that their future world offered opportunities that their mothers may not have had, affording them more chances to use their intelligence.

P1: Back then women did not really have a role ... women now ... have the same jobs as men...

P1: Well then, women, all they did was sit at home, cooking and cleaning; they did not do jobs that needed fit bodies and buff ...

P4: Isn't it funny though now that we are expected to stay home and all that as well, even though no one says it?

P3: But we're also expected to go out and work.

Focus group 1, School A, Year 10/11

P: A hundred years ago, women weren't allowed to be smart. Men had to be smart.

P: They had to be smart quietly.

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

5.5 Giftedness in Popular Culture

Having discussed their responses to the concept of giftedness and their identification as gifted individuals, attention was given to the representation of giftedness and talent in popular culture. In order to explore the impact the messages and images in popular culture had on

talent development, the girls were asked to talk about the way popular culture presented intelligence. As the girls talked about this concept, they used both fictional and real characters and personalities to illustrate their thinking. They noted that there were images of intelligent girls in the popular culture they watched. The girls felt that, if you wanted to achieve in an academic setting, Lisa Simpson ('The Simpsons') indicated that it was up to the individual and that it required independence and persistence to achieve your potential. Their basic premise about the way popular culture presented giftedness is explained in the following excerpt from an interview:

P: You've got to do it yourself, you've got to find it somehow and do it, I'm referring to 'The Simpsons', like Lisa, she found it and is using it.

R: ... do you think it knocks people who are clever though or makes mockery of them?

P: A little bit ... there's no 8-year-old girl who's that smart, it's ... over-exaggerating it to make something that you can mock.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

Lisa Simpson was one of the characters identified as being an academic, gifted girl, despite her obvious age difference to the participants and the concern that her character was constructed to, perhaps, mock those who are clever. As a real personality, Jessica Mauboy was identified as a model for younger girls, even when the participant did not like her (*I absolutely loathe her*, Participant, Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11). She was seen as someone who provided young girls with a positive example of giftedness, as highlighted in this excerpt:

P: Except for Jessica Mauboy ... she is an exception and I think that they did that deliberately too ... they are really trying to enforce that curves are good and your skin colour doesn't matter and it doesn't matter if you're intelligent, like it's good to be intelligent ... they are really trying to enforce that into young girls now and I think it's a really good thing, but it's been a long time coming.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

Intelligence was not necessarily presented positively in popular culture. 'Mean Girls' was also used as an example of the way giftedness and girls were portrayed. The girls were critical of the way the movie suggested intelligence was useful, as indicated below:

P1: ... I think it's telling us to use our intelligence ... to plot against each other rather than aspire to be smarter or go onto uni ... it's telling us just to play it against each other and not be very nice.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

5.5.1 Smart Stars

It was possible for the Year 10/11 girls to identify some celebrities as ‘smarter’ than others. The identities they acknowledged as smart had a range of characteristics, whether they were fictional characters or real people. The following excerpt is an example of a real celebrity they identified as gifted:

P: I don't like him but, Jack Black ... in the movies that he is in ... he is himself. Like ‘School of Rock’ he is that character.

P: I think it's just that he can't play any more than one character.

P: ... he is gifted with music, we can't deny that. So he is true to himself in the movies that he has played ...

Focus group 2, School A, Year 10/11

Having a specific, observable talent was one of the ways the girls identified giftedness in visual media. In other instances, it was personal attributes that they felt indicated ability, shown in the next two excerpts:

R: Who would be the smart women that you would see on television?

P: Female Koch, Mel on Sunrise.

P: She's a woman, she's a woman with values and children...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

- P: I reckon Ellen to a degree.
- P: Ellen DeGeneres?
- P: Because she's ... come out and said you know, 'I'm gay' ... there wasn't any secret, there wasn't this big fuss about it, it was just 'I'm gay'.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

While the girls responded to the values and personal attributes of the personalities they spoke of, one participant had been entranced by the story of Coco Chanel. As she spoke about her, it was clear that she saw her as a role model, citing her personal attributes and strength of character as the aspects that demonstrated her giftedness:

- P: I saw Coco Chanel ... she's a very intelligent and wise lady.
- P: Is she like a designer ...?
- P: Yeah, she's actually really, really intelligent, it was amazing, particularly for her time, she was a woman and she was so outspoken ... she changed the way that Paris and the design world looked at women's fashion ...
- R: So how did they portray, was it a movie about her ...?
- P: It was about her early life.
- R: So what did she look like? Did they give her a look that says, 'I'm a really clever person?'
- P: ... she wasn't at all stunningly beautiful, she was pretty plain ... The way that they portrayed her personality was what made her, you could sense that she was intelligent and an incredible woman.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

Certain personality characteristics were listed by the girls as being evidence of giftedness in a range of celebrities regularly in popular culture including values, openness, confidence and the capacity to make change. There was a need for signs of talent and an awareness of the way media was constructed to deliver a message. The girls at School A agreed that the portrayal of women as gifted was an important and necessary message.

It was also possible for the girls to identify fictional characters who they felt showed signs of giftedness. At the time of data collection 'Ugly Betty' was a regular show on local television and the main character was one the girls discussed, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

- P: They portray her as intelligent.
- R: ... what do they show that makes you think they portray her as intelligent?
- P: In 'Ugly Betty' there's always a situation or something that she figures it out.
- P: She's the one that fixes it.
- P: She's the assistant and she always knows what she's doing and she doesn't seem like an idiot.

P: ... if you compare her to the other models I guess.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 10/11

They felt that women who were shown as beautiful were not intelligent, whereas Betty demonstrated her intelligence through problem solving and being in control. The women who were the bosses were also stereotyped and their physical appearance was a key feature, as discussed in the following excerpt:

P: It's very stereotyped.

R: Because?

P: Because ... people who work in that profession all look the way they do.

P: No one looks like that.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 10/11

There was agreement that the female characters in 'Grey's Anatomy' must be intelligent because of a perception that doctors were gifted, as indicated below:

P1: ... You have to be ... massively smart to be a doctor.

P3: They're not real people ...

P2: Yeah, the characters [are] smart, but they're not actually smart people necessarily.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

However, they were not comfortable with the way these fictional women behaved in their private lives on the show, and identified that this was a contradictory image for gifted women, explained in the following excerpt:

R: You said that all the women on 'Grey's Anatomy' must be smart 'cause they have to be doctors. Okay, now think about how they're portrayed.

P: Skanky.

P: Pregnant.

R: Is that what you would imagine a smart person would be?

P: No.

R: So why the contradiction?

P: I think it's what makes them ... real ... and if they were just smart, then ... you don't really want to watch.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

The characters of Lisa Simpson, Ugly Betty and Andy Sachs ('The Devil Wears Prada') were noticed by the participants at School A, and the consistency of their racial and class status were commented on in the following excerpt:

- R: And the intelligent women that you are talking about ... they are generally white, middle class. So do you think that television ... and movies emphasise that's who the smart people are?
- P: Possibly.
- P: Yeah.
- P: I think so.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

The girls felt that gifted females tended to be shown as plain, less popular, but very pragmatic and useful characters. They were problem solvers. Their appearance did not meet expectations of beauty. There was sometimes a contradiction in the portrayal of clever career women who led private lives that did not reflect the same level of aspiration and achievement but the girls felt that this was because of audience expectation, as explained in the excerpt below:

- P: I reckon they might make them like that because it's more soap opera ... if they were all smart ... then it'd just be like watching a documentary. It'd be so boring.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

They identified that the field of music was an area where non-mainstream women were shown to have talent. The following excerpt further explained their thoughts about this:

- P: I guess ... it is a race thing ... black, African American women are always going to have their voice ... that's their genes and that's how they remember life like when they were slaves ... that's where jazz and everything came from and that's why they have such sort of big, strong, amazing voices ... on pageants and ... 'Australian Idol' ... the black people always have these amazing voices, but ... [they] never get a spot because they don't have the stereotypical little blonde ...

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

Music culture, while maintaining a stereotype in some ways, allowed those with talent to be successful despite their physical appearance or cultural background. In fictional representations though, sometimes the girls felt that successful women demonstrated characteristics of determination and hardness, with less of the expected softer feminine traits. These women were then presented as unpopular characters that made life difficult for other women. Their description of Meryl Streep's character (Miranda Presley, 'The Devil Wears Prada') highlighted this:

- P: She's really controlling but she's got a soft side because of her husband.
- R: But you don't know that at first do you?
- P: No. They portray the modelling business as really hard and harsh and you have to be a certain way.

Focus group 3, School B, Year 10/11

The girls felt that many of the images presented were stereotyped and that gifted female characters were presented as lonely characters and their success was something to be treated with suspicion, as shown in the following excerpts:

- P: They are also portrayed as people who don't have many friends, sometimes.
- P: ... outcasts because they are intelligent.
- R: How do they show that ...?
- P: There was one episode of 'Sex in the City' where Miranda ... she's buying a new apartment and she's ... looking at the apartment ...
- P: The realtor ...
- P: The real estate person ... just couldn't get his head around a single woman being able to pay for this apartment all on her own without any help ... she had to ... to write and specifically say that she was a single lady ... people can't understand that, that women can be really successful and have money and ... be able to do those things.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

- P: And also they seem to portray women ... if they are intelligent ... they are really shut off to the world and they just don't want to love anyone ...
- P: They are ice cold.
- P: Yeah they are ice cold, horrible people but that's not the case at all. There are so many women out there who are really loving and caring people and they are not icy and cold and horrible, they are actually just really intelligent, but have an amount of ...
- P: Compassion.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

The girls talked about the fictional character, John Keating (played by Robin Williams in 'Dead Poets Society'), who was shown as someone with intelligence because of his passion and knowledge about literature. His physical appearance, diet, clothing is not mentioned at all in the comment, and the impression he has left on the participant is one of passion about his knowledge, evident in the excerpt:

- P: In a movie, 'Dead Poets Society' ... he acts ... that sort of passion about literature and ... his view of the world and ... he imprints his view on all these kids. And just because he's so passionate and ... obviously very intelligent ... it would be cool to have a teacher like that.

Focus group 3, School A, Year 10/11

This is a contrast to the earlier comment that showing intelligent female characters would be not interesting to viewers. The girls felt that the portrayal of gifted women in popular culture, both real and fictional, was different to that of men, who they felt were portrayed as more interesting.

5.6 Responding to Giftedness within Popular Culture

These Year 10/11 girls showed through their conversation and reflective writing that popular culture was a large part of their lives. It provided them with entertainment, information, friendships and guidelines. Through visual images and textual description, it showed them ways to be and offered examples of women in different roles and relationships that broadened their experiences in their regional centre. They engaged with elements of popular culture every day both individually and collectively, with their peers and their families. They suggested that, while they were able to critically consider aspects of popular culture, they were perhaps not fully aware of how it influenced them in their daily lives, as explained in this excerpt:

- R: ... it's such an integral part of your conversation that I wondered ... whether you even realised if it influences you.
- P2: Probably not as much as it really does because it is just part of our lives; we go home and switch on the TV or read a magazine or something and just don't even realise.
- R: Do you think it matters that you don't realise?
- P2: Not really. What we do is what we want to do I guess ...
- P1: If it is having a really negative effect you probably want to realise so you cannot do it. But I don't think there's much pop culture that has a really bad effect on kids, the worst thing would be ... it promotes binge drinking and drug use and stuff like that. But ... most people can realise that life isn't really like that ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

The girls felt that they were able to discern when popular culture was not showing them valid truths, or giving them inappropriate messages and that they understood why and how images were altered to meet expectations. They felt that adolescence in particular was not shown truthfully on mainstream popular culture, but that one of the key differences was because of the predominance of American media in Australia.

There was a sense that they felt that some girls changed their behaviours in terms of appearance and fashion as a result of the images in popular culture, but that not all girls did. The girls noted that while popular culture included magazine articles and advertisements

advising of the problems caused by alcohol and drug taking, the content also promoted these behaviours and did not change the behaviours of their peers, as shown in the next excerpt:

- P1: It's a common thing that comes with our age group, is drinking and drugs.
P2: Coz if you read in a magazine that you shouldn't drink, it doesn't stop you.
R: ... but would it make you think about it?
P1: Yeah.
P2: You probably think about it and you'd probably make smarter choices but it still wouldn't stop you.

Focus group 1, School B, Year 10/11

Despite being aware of when behaviours may not be influenced by popular culture, over the time of the research the girls had used terms such as 'sucked in' and 'manipulated' when talking about their responses to popular culture. Their conversation indicated that popular culture did have an impact on their choices and decisions when it came to fashion, relationships and self-esteem.

As the concept of giftedness was new to them in terms of themselves, they had not previously responded to popular culture while thinking about levels of ability or performance. They had formed goals and developed their aspirations from a range of influences, with popular culture being one of them. The way they described the life of a celebrity indicated their lack of desire to be one. Popular culture did not encourage them to develop their talents in terms of performing or being a star.

Only once in the discussion did any girl talk about an inspirational woman who had achieved in the business and fashion world because of her intelligence and ability—Coco Chanel—about whom she had learned through popular culture. In all the talk about magazine content, television and movie content, they had not previously considered the role that giftedness played in the characters' success or choices. They did not talk about the content of popular culture as being aspirational, and particularly not for gifted individuals. Role models were not identified from characters in popular culture, or reported in popular culture. The following excerpt explains this:

- P1: I think it just makes you aspire to different things than you really want to ... instead of aspiring for your job ... you aspire to things more in your peer level. Probably just because we're already in real life aspiring for uni and a job so we don't want to be thinking about that in movies ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

Popular culture gave the girls messages about their bodies, their relationships, their behaviours and the roles they could play in work settings, and most of these messages placed clever women as the fixer or problem solver. The beautiful women in leadership were not identified by the girls as gifted—although they had achieved the status of leader. They felt these women were lonely and lacking the caring persona that they associated with women. They did not aspire to have the jobs that the fictional women in popular culture had. None of these girls aspired to be supermodels or media stars. The life goals they had set did not emerge only from what they saw in popular culture. Their goals included careers, family and travel and they wanted to achieve all of these in a short space of time.

5.6.1 Influences on Talent Development

In some families the girls felt that their parents had high aspirations for them, because they wanted them to have more chances in life, as these girls spoke about in an interview:

P: My parents want me to get a better job than what they had. Dad's a truck driver and Mum was a child carer ... She dropped out at Year 11 ... So she wants just better than that.

P: Yeah, my parents want an education. That's all they worry about.

Interview, School B. Year 10/11, M&R

R: What drives your aspiration, your plan ... what gives you the drive to get there?

P1: I guess your family ... other people ... if your parents never got to be what they wanted to be ... they push you to do what you want to do ... the fact that they couldn't do what they wanted to do pushes you to be what you want to be.

R: Do they give you a struggle with identity ... are you actually ... putting yourself in a role of someone because they think that's important?

P1: It depends how much they push or if they just want you to be the best that you can be or do whatever you want to do ... encouraging you to be yourself. But if they're forcing you to be a lawyer or be a doctor ... you're taking their identity or being who they want you to be.

R: Which is what you were touching on in a way isn't it that your dad wants you to be. Does he mind you being an architect—did he have a vision like that?

P2: Not really, just since I was little I always wanted to do it ... he's always pushed me and ... I know deep down I do ... but it will be really hard to get there.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

For others there was a sense that culture played a greater part in the way a girl's aspiration were met than popular culture, and that in some contexts, gifted girls would continue to struggle to achieve their potential. This did not appear to have anything to do with popular culture, and the following excerpt explained the girls' thoughts on this:

R: What do you think happens to clever women in those cultures though?

P: They're not, they're taken advantage of ... but not seen as clever ... they're just a woman ...

- P: This actually happened to one of my brother's ... friends, she was a really bright girl, and then she got married, she changed religion, she became Muslim, she got married, she dropped out of school and she had a couple of kids.

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

5.6.2 Barriers to Talent Development

When asked to consider what would prevent them from achieving their goals and their potential, the girls identified a number of barriers that might limit their success. The barriers identified by the girls included a lack of a sense of identity and confidence that came from work, culture, family and friends. Other barriers included parents and their hopes for future, the family culture which lead to expectations, peers who gave you different ideas and gender. For some participants their family limited the possible future options for them because of a differentiated response to gender and academic work, as shown in this interaction:

- P: It's funny, my brothers never did their own assignments really, my mother ... she used to help them ...
- R: But she doesn't do that for you?
- P: No because I'm a girl, my mother's a bit more old-fashioned, she thinks because I'm the girl, I should be doing stuff for my brothers and I can't stand it.
- P: My mum thinks that all the time.
- P: I should be cooking, I should be cleaning my brother's room ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

Some of the girls felt that women were sometimes a barrier to their own development when they contradicted their beliefs with their actions, as described in the following excerpt:

- P5: ... we want equality but when we do get treated ... for example ... a girl will notice there was a spider ... the girls don't want to touch it but the guy might not either. But the girl's going to say, 'Oh no, you should do it because you're the guy' ... you can't expect some things to be still the same. If you're going to want equality you've got to act ... that equality, you can't expect more.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

5.6.3 Popular Culture and Talent Development

Examining the impact popular culture had on the aspirations of this group of girls would suggest whether it had supported or disrupted their talent development. The girls talked about how popular culture may have informed their aspirations or provided them with ideas for their future development. However, some of the girls identified that rather than suggest a future to them, popular culture presented being smart as a complication, as described below:

P2: In some movies all the girls dumb themselves down and then realise, 'I'm so smart, it's better to be smarter' and go for their goal ... I'm referring to 'Legally Blonde'.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, M&R

Because popular culture had always been a large part of their lives, some girls expressed that, even if they wanted to resist its impact, they subconsciously responded to the messages in popular culture, as expressed in this interview comment:

P1: Even if we don't consciously go, 'Oh yeah, that's what I want to do' ... we're inundated ... from ... little kids, subconsciously we all think, 'Oh, that's how I should be', whether that's how we want to be ... subconsciously we all go 'That's what's right: that image, that society'. Even if we're trying to rebel ... and go 'No that's wrong' ... deep down we're all ... going to go 'Yeah, I kind of do wish I looked like that'...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

For the girls who were interested in the performing arts, popular culture did suggest future career pathways, although in this interview, the girls were not impressed by the celebrities who they did not feel worked to achieve their fame, as the next excerpt shows:

R: So do you look at some of those actresses and actors and aspire to be like them?

P3: Some yes, others not in the slightest ... I really appreciate actors who have actually worked for it ... people who have been ... child stars ... because the parents are famous, that kind of thing just annoys me so bad.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

They tended to distinguish between popular culture and a serious career in the arts, believing that it was easier to achieve when working in popular culture, as expressed below:

R: ... what is the place of popular culture in your life? Does it influence what you want you want to do or doesn't it?

P3: For me greatly because I want to be an actor and that's basically built on the back of popular culture ... highbrow stuff is so difficult to get into, whereas popular culture which is ... easier and ... there's actually a lot of money in it ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

Their belief about being involved in popular culture as a serious career led them to feel that popular culture bred celebrities, who were not necessarily role models for them. However, they acknowledged that popular culture did provide information about other role models, though not enough, as discussed in these interview excerpts:

R: Do you look at people, not just the celebrities but people like Julia Gillard ... do you see them as role models within popular culture?

P2: I can kind of look to them in popular culture as like a role model, [a] select few probably not ...

P1: Yeah, mostly musicians to me.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

P2: Depending on who you're talking about ... if you're talking about displayed in movies ... that are really terrible for portraying intelligent women ... it's very cliché ... they're still the buxom blondes with the nice job, nice house, sort of thing but for some reason they still can't get the guy. It's very frustrating but ... when you see people like ... Julia Gillard ...

I: So more real people, like real intelligent people portrayed fairly?

P1: Yeah absolutely, I don't think Julia Gillard gets enough credit for who she is.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

The Year 10/11 girls also looked at popular culture as an entity, considering its construction, and the creativity demonstrated by those who created content. They felt that it could allow space to be creative and so could encourage adolescent girls to be individuals, as these comments showed:

P3: If you look at society and ... the amount of people involved ... some of those people ... I think it definitely does promote intelligence because a lot of the people who basically built popular culture, they were very clever people.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

P2: I don't think popular culture has much to do with intelligence ... it is not so much about ... being intellectual or whatever. But I think people who start the trends and they have created this idea, are very clever in what they have done ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

There were examples in popular culture of clever women, who had really thought about the power that popular culture afforded them to be successful and had used it to become celebrities, as the following comment identified:

P: Yeah, this underlying cleverness ... people like Lady Gaga ... she's not stupid obviously ... even Keisha, she might dance around like a fool and act really stupid. But like this whole thing that she's constructed, this image, she's thought about it, she's thought about it hard, like how am I going to do this and ... God damn her it works.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

When these girls considered the ongoing development of popular culture, they described changes in people's responses to it that indicated a greater resistance to its message of conformity, and in this way it provided support for them to aspire to be individual and different, as they explained in this conversation:

P: I think these days popular culture is looked at really cynically ... a lot more people actually just look at popular culture and go the exact opposite way. It's like all of the rebels and the punk kids and whatever they're called these days, it is a form of popular culture ... they're trying to not be the popular culture ...

- P: Like all the alternate stuff ... alternate music has become the new culture music ...
- P: Especially independent music.
- R: So it doesn't ... limit what you aspire to?
- P: I don't think so, no, it gives options that people can take more seriously than they're presented ...
- P: ... I think that is more ... out of the fact that they realise, 'oh, we're not going to look like skinny little Size 8 models really' ... it's ... not that they don't want to be like that, more that they realise 'Oh, we can't really be like that ...'
- P: Let's make our own thing.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

The girls appeared to feel that they were more able to think critically about the messages and choose whether to follow the trends or not. It was advertisers, they noted, who seemed to be continuing to push the stereotypical images of women and their life choices. The following excerpt described this idea:

- P: ... to let go of that sort of pressure ... put on them by society in general is a pretty big thing to do, like just be like accept it and just be their own person.
- R: But you seem to have all done that.
- P: Yeah, outwardly.
- P: With the culture images, like the Size 8 thing ... now they have introduced models who aren't size 8 because they've realised that people who are going to be watching this kind of stuff ...
- P: Don't want it, they want to believe they can be ...
- P: ... they want to be able to say ... you can look good in this ...
- P: Modelling is a wishing activity ... this sounds horrible and it's my personal view but modelling is a fantasy ... 'I want to be like her but I know that I can't' ... And that's why they should still have size 6 models ... I don't think that there should be anyone that's larger than a size 10, because that ruins the fantasy and the illusion and the high class of modelling. And that's what the advertisers originally set out to do with it.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

There were two contrasting views of the way that popular culture supported talent development expressed by the girls during the discussions and interviews. The first identified that popular culture had provided a window into the different ways to be and that it actually showed that the intelligence needed for success was not a singular entity, but different careers needed different kinds of intelligence, explained in the following interaction:

- P5: Popular culture ... has developed the idea of what we, both smart people and what intelligence, can lead to. Without popular culture we wouldn't actually be able to see the contrasts ... popular culture has led us to believe that being a doctor or a scientist ... those

things require a massive amount of intelligence. Whereas we all have thought being a musician or whatever, it is just like you just need the right ticket and kind of thing like ...

P1: It's the same with stuff like PR and public relations ... in order to do that you need to know people and in order to actually run a successful business, say doing event management ... you need to be able to, a, know people, b, know the trends.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

The second view expressed was that popular culture continued to present the idea that girls were not intelligent, and if they were, this was not an accepted way to be. In this comment, the participant dismissed this idea, and in doing so, highlighted the critical stance that these girls had shown during the research about popular culture:

R: Does it influence whether it's a good thing to be academic or not?

P: ... everything you watch the girls have to be stupid and that's just how it is. And the smart ones are always looked down upon by males and things like that. But ... I don't care because ... you have to aim to improve things in life. If you just act like that, you get nowhere. I mean, you may get a husband ...

Focus group 2, School B, Year 10/11

5.6.4 Responding to Being Involved in the Project

When initially invited to join the project, all the girls were enthusiastic and keen to begin. Over the two years of data collection a core group of Year 10/11 girls continued to attend the data gathering sessions and to engage fully with the discussion. While they did not complete the journals with as much detail as the Year 7 girls and did not return them, their conversation in the focus groups demonstrated that they had talked about some of the ideas raised between times, and had thought about what we had talked about. They often came back with extended ideas based on a previous conversation.

The research project provided the girls with the opportunity to meet regularly, to talk about their ideas, their thoughts and their plans and they identified that their involvement had been something that would help them grow in their own sense of self, as expressed in this excerpt from an interview:

P1: Oh it definitely changed my perspective ... because there's so many people in this school that do follow like certain trends. And then to sort of stop and like take a look at it all, you kind of feel better off for it ... you just feel that you know more about it now. You know why people follow these trends and whatever, you can take a step back ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

For some of the girls, the chance to hear others' views and to share their own ideas was something they had valued, as this interaction showed:

R: Do you think you changed in your view of life or your view of school having been involved in this?

P2: To know what type of things are out there and people and what they've got to say and their opinions ... listening to other girls' opinions ... I don't know, seeing what they thought about the same topics ... the different opinions on things.

R: I often had a sense that it was something you talked about outside of here ... do you talk about popular culture ...?

P1: We do but we don't analyse it ... we talk about it, we don't think about what it means as much as what we were talking about in here.

P2: Yeah, not as much in-depth as in here, much more detailed and interesting.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, R&M

Because the groups were formed based on testing results, the groups were not the same as the social groups the girls were part of outside of the research, which did not seem to impact on the engagement in conversation. It was a feature of their rural/regional background that some of the girls had actually known each other since primary school days and been in classes together through high school although not necessarily in the same friendship groups.

5.7 Conclusion

5.7.1 The Year 10/11 Case

The Year 10/11 girls presented as confident, articulate adolescents who engaged enthusiastically with the opportunity to talk about their ideas and observations of their world. During the focus groups they carried the conversation from each question, without needing a lot of prompting or involvement on the part of the researcher. They listened to each other, responded to each other and developed the ideas across the group. Conversation was sometimes tangential to the original question.

In transition from junior high school to senior school, at a time when they were beginning to think beyond school and to plan for their future, these girls saw popular culture as an intrinsic part of their lives. They defined popular culture as media, but also as objects and trends, that were devised and shared among their peers as a social experience. They engaged with popular culture as viewers, commentators and critics and had a vast store of knowledge about characters, celebrities, structures and genre. All of the girls had regular access to all forms of

media and appeared to have control over their access. Their conversations and journals revealed that they spent considerable time each day engaging with social media, watching either television or movies or reading magazines. Most of their engagement with popular culture happened at home, and with family and friends.

The girls were very aware of the constructed nature of popular culture, and of the way that creators made intentional choices to utilise the power of popular culture to get messages to the audience. Popular culture delivered messages about appearance, behaviour and relationships and continued to suggest to these adolescent girls that they needed to present themselves in certain ways to meet expectations. These girls recognised that popular culture provided positive and negative support for young girls as they sought to establish an identity and nurture their abilities. Girls were influenced in their decisions and choices not only by popular culture, but also by their family culture, their friends and their context. These variables impacted on individuals in different ways.

The girls felt that the celebrities and characters in popular culture who represented gifted women and girls did not meet the stereotype for female appearance, and were the problem solvers and fixers, but not the central characters in many shows. There was concern that popular culture suggested that, when a female was beautiful, she tended to use her intelligence to manipulate or damage others, rather than for support and encouragement. Gifted women in popular culture did not have many friends, or have a successful relationship with a partner.

Despite critiquing popular culture, and having the skill to recognise its purposeful construction, there were still times when the girls were influenced by its messages, and when they felt pressured to behave in certain ways or change their appearance. At times they did not realise they were being influenced by it. In this particular group of girls there was a preference for independent artists and media sources, where the material was more original and less reflective of general trends. In the end, they expressed admiration for those artists who chose to stand out and create their own image.

Even though these girls had not been formally identified prior to this research, it was clear that they felt different from their peers, and had had opportunities offered to them because of

their capacity to perform in school work. They achieved well at school, and found teachers related to them in positive ways, especially as they moved into the senior years. When they spoke of teachers they noted the ones who spoke to them as people, who related to them and encouraged them to achieve, as they felt these were the good teachers. School was a positive environment for them, particularly the girls at School A. Giftedness was defined by these girls as an ability to achieve well, to make independent decisions and to set goals for the future. All the girls felt that they would need to leave their rural/regional setting to achieve what they wanted to achieve. They had clear careers in mind, with diverse areas of interest, although there was a cluster of musical ability and interest. Within the groups there were clearly leaders and others willing to go along with the ideas of others. Some of the girls had strong opinions and depth of knowledge about specific fields. The girls acknowledged that popular culture had provided ideas, information and an insight into the worlds of work but that it was not the only source of influence or information.

Living in a regional centre was not seen as a disadvantage by the girls. They had access to metropolitan areas, and many had visited with families and friends, feeling more confident than their parents to travel around the city, and to participate in social activities. The difference between these girls and their peers in the city was described as a matter of resourcing, experience and motivation. But these girls also identified that they felt they were more aspirational than their city peers, and more independent. All of the girls knew they would not stay in their current location once they had finished school, because they were not necessarily able to achieve their goals from their home town. They wanted to see more of the world which they had been given access to through popular culture.

5.7.2 A Comparison of the Two Cases

The Year 10/11 girls identified that there was a major difference between their responses to popular culture compared to the Year 7/8 girls. When they read the summary of the data, and responded to it, they commented particularly on the different way their abilities were accepted by their peers in Year 10/11, as described in the following excerpt where the participants talk about how it felt to be smart:

P2: I think in Year 7 ... people aren't as accepting ... 'Oh, you're just a nerd', being in Year 11 and 12, it's like, 'Oh gosh, it actually matters that you're smart now'.

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

However, for one participant, it became clear in the interview that she was not feeling the same way. This had not been part of her story during the focus groups and it was a different experience to the other girls in the interview. Her comment below highlights that her giftedness was an issue with some of her peers:

P4: I disagree because I'm sitting here and getting castrated for being smart and ... my friends saying. 'Oh no, well you just make me feel inferior ... you just make us feel inferior because you're smart'. I'm like ... I'm sorry you want to be dumb around... do you want me to act dumb ... is that what you want? And they're basically saying ... we don't accept you because you're smarter than we are.

P3: I think a lot of that has to do with how people feel about themselves ... the whole bully ... pick on the things that they fear in themselves ...

Interview, School A, Year 10/11, H&B

During the time of data gathering, both case study groups changed. The change was most marked in the Year 7/8 girls, who became more compliant with group culture and demonstrated an increased need to conform with their peers. Compared to the Year 10/11 girls, the younger girls were more impacted on by what others said, especially in Year 8. Early in the research, the younger girls strongly advocated for individual difference and expressed a resistance to the messages of popular culture. They continued to express concern about the construction of images and the message of body size and shape that they perceived in popular culture, but they began to ensure that they fit the trends within their own world. The Year 10/11 girls were more cognisant of how popular culture impacted their thinking, although they also acknowledged that they were influenced by the messages in terms of fashion, and some behaviours.

For all the girls, popular culture was an intrinsic aspect of their lives and they spent considerable time engaging with it, alone and with family and friends. Year 7/8 girls talked a lot about the plots and scripts of popular culture, and their conversation was often a recount of various popular shows, or information reported in the media. They engaged most often with visual and social media, while the Year 10/11 girls engaged strongly with print media and music media, as well as with social and visual media. They all found that it delivered messages to them about appearance, behaviour and relationships but that it emphasised these aspects over academic achievement. Success at school was not a key message and career success was presented in terms of clothing and relationships, and less about how to learn the skills and knowledge needed to access a career. They talked about the prevalence of the fashion or entertainment industry in popular culture, with concomitant negative features.

Both case study groups were concerned about the messages that popular culture delivered about achievement and appearance, and both noted that the characters of gifted women in fictional scripts did not make giftedness an appealing way to be. They found that gifted characters were often the odd or quirky character, rarely the main character. They played a role of fixer or sidekick. Lisa Simpson was identified by both groups as a key model of giftedness in popular culture, and across the age groups the girls felt that gifted women were presented as lonely social outcasts. While the Year 7/8 girls admired celebrities who worked hard and behaved in socially acceptable ways, the Year 10/11 girls admired those who resisted fitting the expected roles and used their strengths to create their persona in the media. They were more impressed with the independent media scene than the mainstream popular culture.

For the Year 10/11 girls, in particular, there was a concern that the adolescent girls presented were not realistic, and that school life was not represented realistically. They noted that popular culture needed to be entertaining and that real life, and those who were gifted, would not work as entertainment. The Year 7/8 girls had a similar sentiment.

Only three of the girls in Year 7/8 had been formally identified as gifted before this project, when they were selected for a local opportunity class. All of the girls, though, had felt that they were different from other girls in their cohort, and had noticed that they were invited to engage in different activities, offered opportunities that reflected their abilities, and had a different relationship with their teachers. School life was not always about academic achievement for most of these girls but rather about social activity. As they moved into Year 11, the Year 10/11 girls noticed a change in their workload and the seriousness of academic activity. They all knew of girls who did not prioritise school and who were not interested in achieving educational goals. All of the girls in both age groups planned to finish Year 12 and at some stage go onto further education. They had many ideas for their futures and they all wanted to achieve their goals very quickly. Overseas travel, multiple careers, family and happiness were on most of their lists.

The most noticeable difference between the two age groups was in their awareness of their personal responses to popular culture. The Year 10/11 girls were able to critique the images and messages presented while at the same time recognise that they still found themselves

responding to them and following the trends. The Year 7/8 girls tended to be less discriminating about the messages, particularly about their celebrity idols, believing the information that was given about them as true. At the same time they talked about the practice of manipulating images to create a more perfect image and the falsity of some of the images shown in popular culture. They became more influenced by the messages delivered about appearance over the time and followed the trends more explicitly as they moved into Year 8.

Popular culture guided these two groups of girls to make choices about their behaviours and their identities that sometimes reduced their capacity to demonstrate their full abilities. They found role models in the media, although these were more often celebrities in the entertainment industry than women in different societal roles. They did not feel that giftedness was presented in a way that encouraged girls to value their ability.

5.7.3 A Researcher Reflection

The literature had indicated that the role of leading focus groups and participating in the discussion was a challenging role to play (Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Michell, 1999). Reflecting on the impact of my presence in the focus groups, and analysing how this may have changed the responses was a necessary part of the analysis process.

Through my work over a number of years with gifted girls in early adolescence in classrooms, I was aware that I entered the research with a mindset towards popular culture. Acknowledging this, and framing the research as exploratory led me to intentionally allow the girls to take control of the direction of the conversation when possible, finding their own focus based on my initial question guide. By keeping a journal that reflected my responses to each research activity, and interrogating the voice recordings to consider tone of voice, hesitation and expression, it was possible to identify where my presence may have influenced what was emerging through the conversation, during data analysis.

The physical environment of the rooms was important to consider. Each time we met we sat around a large table, which allowed all participants to see each other and be included in the group. As researcher, I chose to sit in different places around the table, but within the circle. On entry the girls chose their seat, and there was some movement when others arrived. I was able to observe each girl, and their non-verbal interaction with each other and the group.

The two case groups were different in their response to the situation. As younger girls, all the Year 7/8 participants were more reticent, and tended to rely on the next question I asked to guide the conversation. My position as an interested adult with no connection to their schools or teachers, afforded them a sense of freedom to be critical of their contexts and to seek my opinion on some issues within school. However, they depended on my input to build the conversation. Throughout the Year 7/8 focus groups and interviews, I found myself very aware of the role I was playing in the direction and deliberately waited for responses if none were immediately forthcoming. The following entry into my journal reflects my feelings about this:

They are not as comfortable with each other ...hard work with Year 7 ...need something directly to talk about ...very uncomfortable with talk about smart/gifted ...

(researcher journal, April, 2009)

This same feeling did not permeate the Year 10/11 group conversations. An opening question would be taken up and the direction led entirely by the group of girls, in both school settings. The transcripts reflected this, as the girls passed the conversation around and my voice remained absent for extensive periods of time. During these sessions, I sometimes found it challenging to allow the movement, without directing it to specific questions. My planned guides provided points to touch on, but the free flow of conversation often addressed the issues, and extended the ideas markedly. Across the period of research, the relationship with the Year 10/11 girls was more one of shared power, as indicated in excerpts from my research journal:

The girls were quite strong and seemed to feel powerful as they spoke out about their opinions, their ideas

(researcher journal, March 2009)

So many different thoughts and ideas came out and I became engaged as a participant – had to keep reminding myself I was the researcher and not just someone sharing conversation with them ...

(researcher journal, Sept. 2010)

As a qualitative researcher and an adult in a room of adolescent girls, there was always a potential power relationship that could influence the findings in this project. By generating data through multiple sources, and triangulating emergent information, points where the power relationships may have influenced the engagement of the girls could be identified and reviewed against other sources of data.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1: Introduction

6.1.1 The Case Studies

This research study investigated the question: *In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls?* Its intent was to consider this question by exploring two cases of gifted rural adolescent girls and their responses to the content and presence of popular culture in their lives. The first case study was a group of girls in early adolescence in their initial year of high school. The second case study was a group of girls in mid-adolescence, who at 16 years old, were entering the final years of high school. In the first year of the study, the girls participated in a series of focus groups across the year. During this time they kept personal journals and logged their engagement with popular culture. In the second year of the study, we met only once, when some of the girls volunteered to participate in an interview, where they were able to talk about the findings and respond to questions that highlighted the details.

Each focus group meeting was well-attended across the year, and when the girls were invited back for interviews, there were more volunteers than expected, with the Year 10/11 girls particularly keen to come back for further conversation. The journals, handed out in the first session, were not successful data collection tools. For some girls, the journal helped the expression of thoughts and understandings of their feelings. Others used it simply to report back on ideas. The log pages gave an impression of how they responded to the popular culture they regularly interacted with. Overall, while the journals provided some interesting snippets of personal reflection, they were filled in spasmodically and not all were returned. It was the conversation and face-to-face opportunity to talk that provided a deep insight into these groups of adolescent rural gifted girls. Each case group provided an insight into the lived experience of the gifted adolescent girl in a regional area. Together, the narrative of the cases enabled reflection on whether popular culture was a potential support or disruption to the girls' talent development.

Figure 6.1 presents a map of the chapter, guiding the reader through the responses to the research questions, and the ensuing discussion.

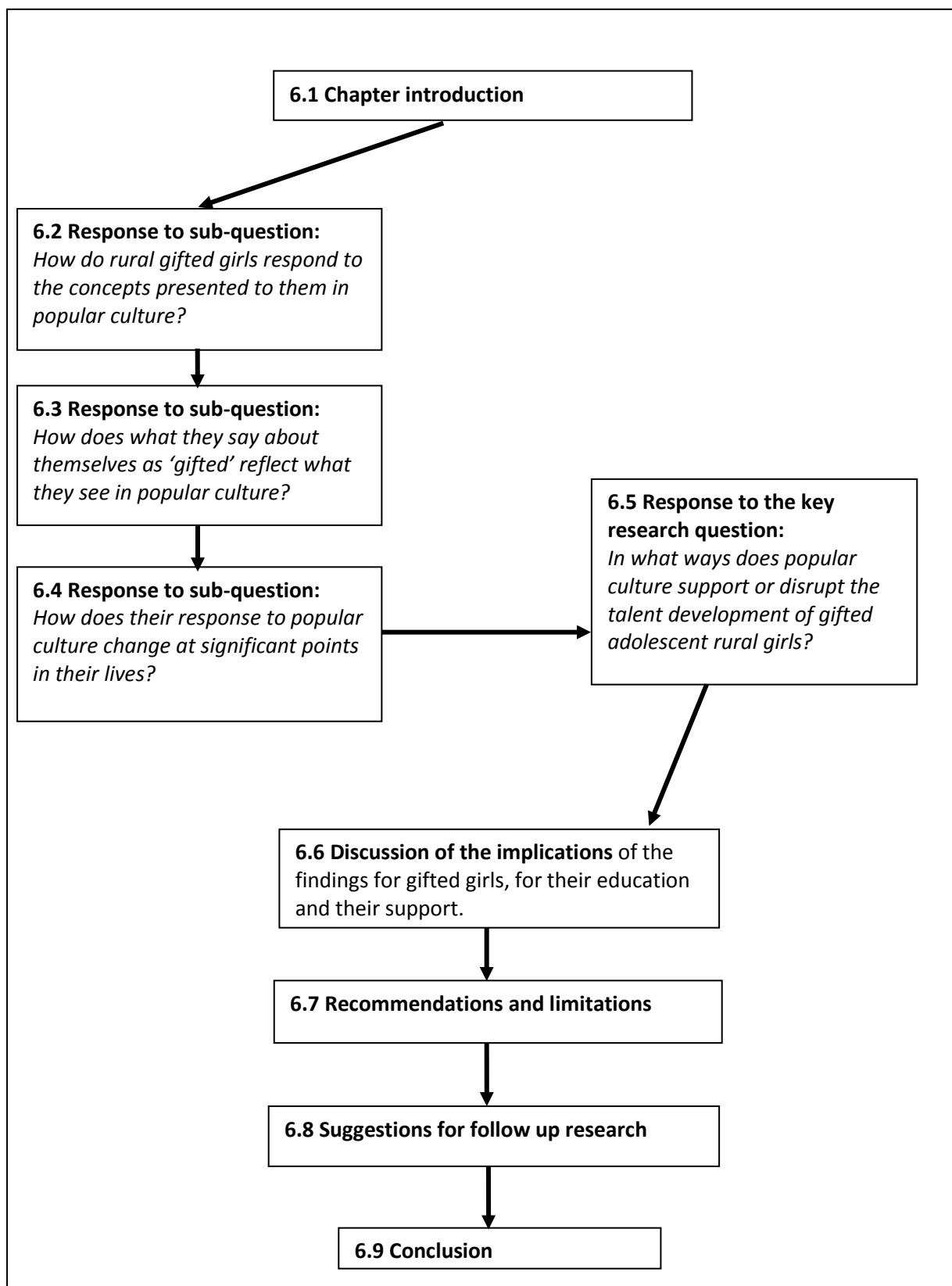


Figure 6.1: Outline of Chapter 6

The findings have provided responses to the three sub-questions proposed in the original research:

4. *How do rural gifted girls respond to the concepts presented to them in popular culture?*
5. *How does what they say about themselves as 'gifted' reflect what they see in popular culture?*
6. *How does their response to popular culture change at significant points in their lives?*

After discussing these, the response to the key research question will be examined, and the chapter will explore the implications in the broader context of gifted education in Australia. Longer term implications and suggestions will be presented in the conclusion of the chapter, along with limitations of this particular study.

6.2 The Way Girls Respond to Popular Culture

The first research sub-question asked about the response of rural gifted girls to the concepts presented to them in popular culture. Across the case study groups, the girls identified popular culture as a source of information for their lives, a source of insight into the lives of real people and a source of fantasy ideas about what life could be like. Sometimes the girls' responses indicated that they found it hard to distinguish between the factual reporting of real life and the creative interpretations of lives, either in print or visual media. They responded to the inside information that popular culture provided for its audience, including snippets of personal details and photographs of celebrities doing everyday tasks, enjoying the opportunity to live vicariously in ways not possible for them at this stage of their lives. Their fascination was not necessarily something they were conscious of, or deliberate about, but reflected the long-term access they had had to this information and the ease of this access. The data illustrated different ways the girls responded to popular culture and identified a number of concepts that became evident as the girls contributed to the discussions.

6.2.1 Ways of Responding

Most simply, the girls responded literally and non-critically to the contents and presentation of information in the different sources of popular culture material that they accessed frequently. They engaged with content to escape, to fill in time, to connect with friends and as a source of common topics in the conversation at school. They believed what they read and

saw, and compared their lives to those of celebrities, some of whom were also adolescent, though many were adult. This level of engagement was predicted in the literature (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Driscoll, 2002; Fabrianesi, 2007; Hylmo, 2006; McRobbie & McCabe, 1981; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). These multiple life stories, ongoing but episodic, constructed across a number of celebrity individuals, potentially provided role models for the girls to emulate. The literature suggested that such aggregations could confuse adolescent girls, or position them in ways that would not support individual talent development (Buckingham, 1993; Duits, 2010; Giddens, 1991; Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, 1993).

The girls also responded critically to the material they engaged with, critiquing the images they encountered and identifying the pressure put on celebrities by the media to meet expectations of beauty and physical appearance. The girls did not trust the images and saw through the techniques used to convince the audience that the information was true and valid, particularly when referring to beauty or health products and diet advertisements. There was a sense that popular culture presented biased views of life, and society, in its content. The power of popular culture to set expectations that appeared to give young girls little choice in what they needed to look like is discussed frequently in the literature around body image and appearance (Bentley, 1999; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006a, 2006b; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). Sometimes the responses were emotive, as the girls empathised with some celebrities who they felt did not deserve the treatment they received, expressing concern that it was sometimes impossible for a celebrity to meet the expectations of being in the public eye. The high level of public scrutiny that a celebrity experienced evoked some discomfort, and they responded with concern that life would be hard when in the public eye so frequently, feeling that it was not always fair that media made the personal lives of celebrities public property. There was no literature that explored the impact popular culture had on emotional intelligence to provide insight into this response.

The diverse, but evident, responses that popular culture evoked in the girls confirmed that it was a major part of their lives. Sometimes the responses were intense and emanated from considerable thought and reflection on what they were seeing. At other times the responses emerged as they talked about popular culture and they were surprised by the depth of their feeling or the realisation that this is how it impacted on them. Analysis of the transcripts consistently produced a number of emergent themes that appeared to underline what the girls

had learned from watching, reading, listening and interacting with popular culture. These themes are addressed in the following discussion.

6.2.2 Emerging Themes

6.2.2.1 A Source of Information

Popular culture was an important source of information for the girls. Across the various forms of popular culture they found answers to their questions about what to wear, how to behave, how to do hair or put on makeup, and how to respond in a variety of situations. While they liked the way that it gave them ideas for fashion, decorating and personal appearance there was some evidence that their goals and aspirations were shaped by what they saw and understood from the mediated images. This was perhaps in response to pressure to align themselves with what they learned through the content of popular culture, interpreting the fantasies presented as truth and using the information to define their identity and connect with peers. Such responses were described in the literature by Duits (2010), Martin (1994), Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) and Tally (2007).

However, it must be acknowledged that the girls also talked about a diverse range of other topics, and there was a sense of play about their conversations. This appeared to support Duits' (2010) claim that the seriousness of the need for adolescent girls to connect through popular culture may have been overemphasised. In their ongoing peer conversations the girls tested their responses to the messages presented in popular culture, and in doing so defined an emerging identity, and applied appropriate symbols and actions to represent themselves, affirming the suggestion put forward by Duits (2010) that popular culture provided tools for developing the sense of self.

The focus on individuality and choice expressed strongly by the girls in their conversations was sometimes at odds with the conformity evident in their clothing and their language. Mimetic imitation of the ideas and images meant that the girls deliberately used what they learned, interpreting and adapting the information to suit themselves, demonstrating the notions of diversity and difference suggested by third wave feminists writers (Renegar & Sowards, 2009; Showden, 2009; Snyder, 2008; Tong, 1989). These same writers claimed that the level of conformity to social expectation expressed in the images and messages in popular culture contradicted individuality. However, the girls' conversation highlighted their use of

the information as stimulus for their own thinking. Popular culture served as a platform for playfully testing out personal ideas and values, and as such, its role as one source of such information was valuable (Duits, 2010; Karlyn, 2006; Snyder, 2008). It becomes problematic as a singular instructional guide if it sets boundaries and positions girls in ways that constrains individual growth and confidence (McRobbie, 1991; Walkerdine, 1993). It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that the girls themselves identified popular culture as an important source of information. It positioned them, either overtly or discreetly, and impacted on their ways of responding. Among the girls there was some evidence that some individuals were quite vulnerable to media messages that promoted certain ways to be successful as suggested by Pipher (1994) and Walkerdine (1993). However, it is as important to note that they also identified other sources of influence, including families, peers and their community.

6.2.2.2 Beautiful Women

The second theme that emerged from the findings was that women needed to be beautiful to be successful, and needed to maintain their beauty and their thinness as a priority. The girls suggested that the popular culture definition of beautiful was women who were tall and thin, with long hair, white teeth and clear skin. This description was gleaned from the many advertisements for beauty products and makeup, and the many pictures of celebrities presented in the media. Across the range of media with which the girls engaged, the images of women were consistent with the girls' definition, and this has been recognised in literature (Charles, 2010; Cheu, 2007; Hamilton, 2008; Harris, 2004; Pipher, 1994; Signorelli, 1997; Wohlwend, 2009). Advertising in both print and visual media devoted considerable space to highlighting how to create the appropriate appearance, and a defined set of standard appearances that the girls were able to recount in their conversations.

Many of the movies and shows the girls watched were produced through the Disney production company, which is discussed in the literature as a powerful force in delivering a specific message about appearance (Cheu, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009). The girls were able to recognise the Disney princess, a characterisation that is ubiquitous in all Disney female characters (Cheu, 2007). They had played in childhood with dolls that represented popular culture characters and remembered that the appearance of the characters guided the play. Wohlwend (2009) suggested that popular culture-based toys positioned girls to behave and respond in stereotyped ways. When the real person is difficult to distinguish from the

character, and images are translated into products, brands and testimonial statements, young girls are not able to discern the truth in terms of the image or avoid connecting image and reality (Durham, 2003; Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005).

The girls worried about their physical appearance and aspired to look like those they admired in the media. Their logs showed that they spent considerable time engaging with popular culture, thus exposing themselves to the images on a daily basis. Even very short exposure to the images in television advertising and programming impacted on a girl's self-image (Bentley, 1999; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). The girls in this research felt that advertising in particular emphasised a woman's body and her appearance, and were impacted by it even as they critiqued it.

6.2.2.3 Manipulating Women

At the same time as successful women needed to present a stereotyped form of beauty, the girls determined that the message delivered by popular culture was that to be successful, a woman needed to be manipulative. The fictional women they saw in visual media, as well as the advice given within the content of articles in print media, did not always promote caring, collaborative or ethical behaviour. The girls had noticed that women who were leaders were not supportive of others and that they spent a lot of time competing with other women and men. This reflected the behaviours of women in popular culture as described by Signorelli (1997). The girls attributed the increase in aggressive competition between girls to the consistent messages in the media of the negative use of power within relationships. These rural adolescent girls also expressed concern that many of their peers saw physical and verbal violence as the solution to problems, especially those concerned with relationships. In the literature such an increased prevalence of aggression in popular culture, including violent attacks in crime shows, aggressive competitiveness in reality shows, and domestic anger between families was seen to normalise it in relationships (Chmelynski, 2006; Littlejohn, 2012; Pipher, 1994; Simmons, 2010).

The girls suggested reality shows were a cause of increased aggression and competition between girls, at school and in sport. These shows, based on competition between individuals who manipulate others in a quest for power, have become a popular genre in television media (Brown, 2005; Charles, 2010; Duits, 2008; Hylmo, 2006; Signorelli, 1997). They were part of

the girls' regular viewing. Showden (2009) expressed concern at the use and misuse of power in female relationships, noting that this had emerged as a feature of the behaviours of young women, attributed to third wave feminism. Power, and its expression and utilisation, was a core driver for early feminists as they sought to empower women to attain the same freedoms and opportunities as males. The disempowerment of some individuals by this behaviour was highlighted across popular culture, but especially in visual media, as characters bullied those who were different, or plotted revenge when they felt they had been maltreated. For the Year 7/8 girls there appeared to be greater concern about this, perhaps related to the changing relationships as they settled into high school. The older girls recalled the feelings but felt less impacted by it and were able to comment critically about its presence in the media. They saw themselves as empowered and able to choose their life direction, recognising the demonstrations of this in popular culture in many of the girl characters. Their sense of self advocacy was sometimes tempered by the fact that, while many of the girl heroes were certainly strong, they continued to meet traditional expectations for physical appearance. These contradictory messages resulted in some confusion for girls who had experienced other girls' aggression, and felt they had to be both aggressive and beautiful to achieve success.

In popular culture, the girl power movement of the 1970s and 1980s showcased young girls who not only met the norms of beauty in appearance but were strong, confident and powerful (Showden, 2009; Tally, 2010). The concept of girl power was linked to women bonding in relationships that afforded them increased confidence and voice. While this was described as a positive phenomenon that empowered young girls to advocate for themselves and achieve their goals, it was contradicted in popular culture by women competing with other females for supremacy (Charles, 2010; Fritzche, 2004; Harris, 2004; Littlejohn, 2012; Showden, 2009).

The girls described examples of 'doing girl' in popular culture, noting that many characters were either adolescent girls in a school setting with considerable freedom to operate independently of family, or adult women in careers or domestic situations, in American settings. They knew of the supergirl character Ja'ime ('Summer Heights High', Lilley, 2007-), who first appeared on Australian television in 2007 but did not find her believable. Charles (2010) described this satirical presentation of a gifted adolescent as an individual who behaved in cruel and arrogant ways to maintain her power over friends. She was portrayed as confident and self-centred, with questionable ethics. The gifted girls involved in

the research felt that the media suggested this was appropriate, but they did not think it reflected their lives. They experienced strong friendships, at a variety of levels, and attributed some of their confidence and aspirations to these friendships.

6.2.2.4 Women in Relationships

The girls did identify that a common message in popular culture was that to be socially acceptable and successful, a girl must seek to have a relationship with the opposite gender. They felt that the characters and themes suggested that every girl needed to prepare herself to meet someone who would fulfil her. Seeking such a relationship was emphasised in young people's television, in movies and in magazines. A theme they described as evident in many Disney movies was of girls changing their style, behaviours and values to be attractive to boys even if the girl began as a robust character with confidence. Cheu (2007) also identified this representation of girls.

Music videos, which formed a large component of the visual media the girls watched, provided the girls with powerful non-verbal messages. They described the images of backup singers and costume and the dramatic representations of the lyrics as giving contradictory messages about the role and place of women, reflecting the discussions of both Giddens (1991) and Wallis (2010) about the continued need to emphasise heterosexual relationships. Core content in print media also suggested to the girls the importance of preparing for the key heterosexual relationship, including content that ostensibly advised girls on how to be successful in a career. This was also discussed in the literature (Carter, 1984; Fabrianesi, 2007; Hamilton, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Walkerdine, 1990). When reading the advice on how to dress to influence or how to interact effectively, the girls noted that there was a covert message that a career is a pathway to a relationship (O'Brien, 1997). Their comments noted that this was illustrated through the emphasis on physical appearance and advice on how to communicate for success, and a lack of technical or practical information about the actual work or requisite skills needed. This reinforced the issues raised by Kearney (2006) about the way that girls tended to remain as consumers of popular culture rather than producers.

Heterosexual same-age relationships were not the only relationships highlighted in popular culture. The significant mentor relationship was a feature of many movies the girls viewed. They described plots that showed an older, successful women engaging collaboratively with

an awkward girl to groom her for success, often defined as finding, or preparing to find, the right partner for her future, as suggested by Cheu (2007). The girls identified that the concept of mentoring presented in popular culture was that of an older woman guiding a girl to adjust her appearance and behaviours to attract male attention and thus a life partner. While this reflected the suggestion in literature that women's ways of working included working collaboratively (Belenky et al., 1986; hooks, 1984; Pipher, 1994), popular culture presents a misinterpretation of this premise. The mentors found in popular culture focus on improving appearance and attractiveness, which the girls felt discouraged young girls from intellectual activity. There was a scarcity of explicitly intellectual and creative women in popular culture as positive role models for the girls in this project to support successful talent development.

6.2.2.5 Clever Women

As the girls talked about clever and successful women, they described the fictional images of successful, clever women as not positive depictions. These women were nasty, sometimes amoral, and made laughable by their manner and appearance (Brown, 2005; Charles, 2010). Their capacity to undertake complex intellectual work was not demonstrated. The popular culture that these gifted rural girls interacted with and talked about tended to imply that it was necessary for women to oppress their intellect. Dixon (1994) suggested that this was the way Australian women tended to behave to be accepted. Clever women who were not traditionally beautiful were portrayed as the sidekick or problem solver. She was someone who looked different, was friendly, and she enjoyed her work. This character was treated poorly by colleagues and peers, often being treated as a joke, or blamed for disasters. The girls felt this was a strong message in popular culture and did not agree with this presentation of clever women. They recognised these women as gifted, but did not feel the portrayal encouraged anyone to nurture their intellectual talent. The literature suggested that there were some good role models in popular culture (Hebert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002; Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005). However, while agreeing that there were some examples, the girls felt they were presented as mundane and did not identify with them. There was little attention paid to the work that was required to be successful, or to learn the skills that allowed the gifted individual to achieve their place in the workforce, even as a sidekick.

6.2.2.6 *Women and Effort*

In popular culture, being successful does not appear to involve hard work. Many of the shows and movies the girls watched that had been produced for an adolescent audience were set in school contexts. The girls identified that while their school life was about both social experiences and academic work, they knew that their teachers recognised that they completed their work before socialising with their peers. They noted that in the movies or television content they watched, many of the main characters attended high school and the plots centred on their social interactions, some sporting activities and final celebrations. This presented school as a social event and the girls questioned when the characters ever completed any academic work. In real life, as in fictional life, they had noticed that some girls worked hard to be in the popular group, living out a message presented in popular culture. They felt that the outsider in the classroom, anyone who was different, or focused on their academic work, was ridiculed on screen. In the world of popular culture, as described by the girls, female characters did not participate in classroom mathematics or science, but were increasingly evident in a number of television crime shows where the women were involved in key areas of scientific investigation. The glamorisation of the STEM areas presented in popular culture had not impacted on these girls' actual engagement with the areas in, or after, school. As they watched women in popular culture they saw neither the effort it would take women to achieve their scientific expertise, or girls engaging in these areas in a classroom.

Magazines were an important source of information about careers but suggested similar messages about effort as a way to achieve success. This was supported by the literature (Carter, 1984; Fabrianesi, Jones, & Reid, 2008; Hamilton, 2008; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006; Valdivia, 1999). The girls noticed that articles about workplaces, careers and future planning did not always include adequate information, and still tended to focus on appearance and fashion for the workplace.

The participant girls enjoyed the classroom environment and related examples of the way they exerted some control over what was happening and invented ways to entertain themselves while at school. Their teachers supported them and provided them with attention but did not challenge them or encourage them to work harder. Contrary to the assertion that girls sought to be invisible in the classroom, and to comply with teacher expectations (Grieve, 1994; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Mann, 1994), these girls enjoyed being known and interacting

with the teachers. Their experience was more similar to that described by Myhill (2002) and Mendez (2000) in that even their informal identification as gifted learners offered with it a freedom to actively participate, achieve well and behave differently than their peers. They did not appear to suffer the impact of high teacher expectations for both performance and organisation or the choice between social and academic pathways that other girls had displayed (Loeb & Jay, 1987; Skelton et al., 2009). They felt that more could be asked of them, and that school was a very social environment for them to work in, contrasting the girls described by Elwood (2005) as the overachieving stereotype. The evidence in this research is that the school life of the gifted girls in this project was perhaps similar to the school life of girls in the world of popular culture, where they are not expected to work hard to achieve, or that their hard work is not to be visible.

When considering the workplace, the girls noted a clear message that successful career women did not need to work at anything except their appearance and the girls discussed how this did not encourage girls to work hard to achieve their goal. They identified this message in both visual and print media. Even when the focus was on a real celebrity, the details of how hard the individual needed to work to achieve their goal were not described. The girls felt that popular culture suggested that the fashion industry, or a creative career, were the appropriate choices for women, and that these careers did not require substantive skills or academic learning for progression from novice to expert, a premise also suggested in the literature (Hylmo, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008; Zuckerman & Dubowitz, 2005). They did not visualise themselves living the lives of the celebrities they encountered in popular culture, real or fictional. When the girls in this research set themselves goals that included careers, family, travel and further education they did not limit their aspirations to celebrity or fictional character examples, but also thought of other people they knew or had read about.

6.2.2.7 Celebrity Role Models

Not all celebrities or popular culture characters were seen by the girls as role models. They were not impressed by the celebrities whose lifestyles included drugs, alcohol and anti-social behaviours, even though popular culture tended to laud this behaviour and promote the antics of some celebrities as heroic. They did not see them as valuable contributors to the world or as good role models for young people. Celebrities who impressed the girls were those who

were not continually visible in popular culture, and those who helped others or contributed to improving lives.

Some of the Year 7/8 girls knew their idols in depth, and had souvenirs and multiple samples of information about them. They were avid fans and their behaviour supported the suggestions in literature that female adolescents embody the culture of fandom (Fritzsche, 2004; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006). They embraced the fine details of the lives of their idols and enjoyed regular gossip sessions about them, utilising information provided in popular culture in the ways described by Duits (2010). The Year 7/8 girls reproduced images seen in popular culture, but then included some original features to make the work their own. Such mimetic imitation allowed them to incorporate their own context, values and self into the identity they were shaping as a result of admiration. This potentially reflects a stronger identity (Kristjansson, 2008). While Kristjansson expressed concern at the prevalence of hedonistic icons present in popular culture, the girls in this study did not support the most notorious of them as heroes. They criticised these celebrities for their lack of control, their dependence on alcohol and drugs and their lifestyle. In real life, these gifted adolescent girls were able to make choices that reflected other influences in their lives and did not rely on the information in popular culture to uniquely drive their choices. The Year 10/11 girls sought role models from popular culture who lived lives that aligned with either the expectations they had absorbed from their families and other community members, or their personal goals that reflected their emerging sense of self. Popular culture was one variable in the sources of guidance they sought.

6.2.2.8 Lifestyles

Popular culture presented the girls with many images of urban life in America. They were able to compare the different social contexts and tended to consider that their lives in regional Australia were better than the fictional ones they saw on the screen. Even though they felt that some of the representations of Australians and Australian life were not true to reality, they were able to identify with the characters. However, they noted that popular culture glossed over the more unpleasant aspects of daily living and highlighted the dramatic, thus presenting an incomplete view of life. As regional girls, they did not feel disadvantaged by their location. Rather than living the idyllic rural life often idealised in popular culture, the girls described their real lives as impacted on by their physical environment, and had

experiences and interests in multiple areas of both manual work and domestic work. Literature found Australian rural women to be proactive in making change (Fincher & Pannelli, 2001; Henderson, 2004). The gifted girls in this study embodied this suggestion.

6.2.2.9 Conclusion

These gifted girls demonstrated a series of responses to popular culture that were behavioural. They believed it, they critiqued it, they responded emotionally and they sometimes followed the inherent messages. They participated in vibrant and detailed conversations about the content of popular culture and they connected it to their identity and their own lives. As well, they created meaning from the content of popular culture, and their commentary produced thematic focus points that are both supported and contradicted in the literature. These focus themes included ideas about what women need to do to be successful, how they related to each other and what it meant to be intellectual. A key concept was that popular culture provided them with information, instruction and models to support the development of their sense of self but it did not promote intellectual behaviour or support giftedness as a positive attribute. However, it did suggest that talent played a role in lived situations and that a talented person could provide comic relief, problem solutions and support for those who are popular. These concepts emerged both explicitly and inferentially from the conversation and reflections and were consistent across both school settings and age groups, although the Year 10/11 girls were most articulate about them. The data showed that, even as these rural girls were able to recognise that popular culture did transmit messages that they questioned, they were also influenced by the messages in terms of their thinking. Initially, the Year 7/8 girls spoke strongly about their capacity to ignore the messages and be themselves. However, as they moved into Year 8 there was evidence that they became more compliant to continue to belong. By Year 10/11 the girls were more confident in established identities that reflected multiple sources of influence.

6.3 The Representation of Giftedness, and Self, in Popular Culture

The girls had not been identified as gifted, nor did they self-identify as gifted, prior to being involved in this project. They described themselves as normal and their lives as ordinary lives filled with school work, home tasks and social events. They talked about their school lives, future planning and the representation of gifted girls in popular culture in comparison to their own lives as three key aspects of their lives in relation to their giftedness.

6.3.1 School Life

When the girls talked about their lives at school they described it as something easier and less worrisome for them than for some of their peers, although they noted that they had not ever experienced learning planned specifically for their talents. The girls acknowledged that they were aware of their abilities, but had not thought of themselves as gifted. The fact that their schools did not identify them as gifted confirmed the suggestion made by Clark and Zimmerman (2001) that, in rural areas, gifted learners were not identified as frequently as in urban areas, and were underserved in the programs that were available for them. Identification processes needed to allow for the diversity of life experiences available to gifted young people, depending on their serendipitous connections within the community. Such diversity needed to be recognised as an advantage of rural living (Quaglia, 1989; Young, 1998), despite a common perception that rural settings were deficient environments for gifted learners (Arnold, 1991; Clark & Zimmerman, 2001; Cross & Dixon, 1998). Without identification, teachers may hold lower expectations that gifted female students will perform beyond the rest of the class group (Pipher, 1994; Reis, 2002; Siegle & Reis, 1998). When this is the situation, it is probable that the girls will hold similar expectations.

For these girls, though, some teachers held higher expectations of them and did not provide them with as much support as they gave to other students. Some of the girls felt that teachers expected them to always understand the content easily and to be able to finish work quickly, even if they were struggling. But they also noted that their ability to complete work quickly and accurately resulted in teacher approval and the offer of privileges that other students did not receive. Girls play the school game more frequently than boys and were supported tacitly in this through teacher praise for neatness, the colourful appearance of their work, and time spent organising their supplies (Myhill, 2002; Skelton et al., 2009). This was evident in the conversation the girls had about their classroom behaviours. Their conversation about classroom content focused on English lessons, health lessons and, for the younger girls at School B, the school program of circus skills. Science content classes were rarely mentioned, and mathematics classes were spoken about as negative experiences. There was no specific mention of where either age group may be placed in the grade when referring to marks and position, although they knew which boys performed at the highest levels. Some of the Year 7/8 girls were worried about expectations of performance and the fact that they might not being able to do the work that was given to them. They did not measure their performance

against their previous results but rather against boys in their respective classes. Despite girls appearing to generally outperform boys across high school, girls move away from the curriculum areas of science and maths as they progress through school and do not follow up these areas into tertiary study (Carpenter, 1985; Elwood, 2005; Freeman, 2003, 2004; Sadowski, 2010; Watt, Eccles, & Durik, 2006). When the girls completed the timeline activity listing their future careers, many identified that they would go into journalism, photography or artistic careers rather than the sciences or academic careers. These rural students, who in Year 7/8 had strong ideas about environmental issues, did not appear to be engaged in science learning in school, or nominate science as a career choice, despite suggestions made by Laura and Smith (2009) that rural contexts were more able to provide greater opportunities for engaging gifted students in science curriculum due to the ease of access to external environments and their exposure to natural phenomena.

There appeared to be an increase in the confidence of the participants with regard to their level of academic achievement as they grew older rather than a decline in their academic confidence, as suggested by Kline and Short (1991). There was some evidence of increased self-expectation to produce high quality work that looked good, and the girls attributed this to having the time to do this. Lea-Wood and Clunies Ross (1995) found that later in their school lives, Australian school girls were increasingly perfectionist and held themselves accountable for improving the quality of their work.

6.3.2 Future Planning

When considering their futures, both the Year 10/11 and the Year 7/8 participants had chosen a (multi-faceted) career pathway and set expectations for what they would be able to achieve. Popular culture was not mentioned as they did this, suggesting that even though it provided many examples of individuals in adult roles and careers, the girls were influenced by those closer to them, or those in real time. Consistently, they expressed intentions to continue into further education and not remain in their local town. There was little evidence that they felt the pressure to plan a future based on the employment available locally as suggested in the literature (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Fan & Chen, 1999; Quaglia, 1989; Rojewski, 1999). Nor did they indicate that their aspirations for further education were constrained by the barriers identified by Rojewski (1999).

Despite living in a regional area, many of the older girls had already experienced overseas travel (School A) and time in larger metropolitan centres (Schools A and B), and this may have influenced their future thinking. They were not as isolated as the participants in a number of studies that indicated a high rate of dependency on the local community, and a lack of choice in or relevant information about alternative careers, as experienced by some rural young American students (Harris, 2007; Montgomery, 2004; Rojewski, 1999; Vermulean & Minor, 1988). Within the local community they had opportunities to lead activities and to participate with diverse peers in sport and cultural activities, and chances to work with a range of co-workers of different ages and genders. Popular culture was only one source of information for these girls, and, as suggested by Vermulean and Minor (1988), decisions about future pathways emerged from a range of sources. They did not seek to emulate the glamorous careers of many popular culture icons, either in the entertainment field or the world of fashion. Families and teachers provided a valuable source of information and sometimes exerted pressure on the girls to achieve, which the literature suggested could potentially result in the girls selecting careers expressly to meet family expectations (Eccles, 1987; Grant et al., 2000; Heller & Ziegel, 1996). Girls have been found to succumb to pressure to meet family expectations, and families who recognised giftedness in their girls may apply pressure on a girl to achieve in non-traditional areas of talent or to satisfy family dreams of achievement. This resulted in choices that did not reflect personal goals and a decline in achievement over a period of time (Ambrose, 2003; Freeman, 2004; Leung, Connoley, & Scheel, 1994; Mann, 1994). However, studies of specific talent development in females highlighted that women did not achieve fulfilment of their talent until later in life (Kerr, 1997; Moon, 2003; Noble et al., 1999; Piirto, 1991, 2000; Reis, 1998). Career decisions made in adolescence reflected that a girl's identity was still in diffusion (Giddens, 1991; Marcia, 1966). This supported the inclusion of time in the developmental process suggested by Gagné (2008) in his talent development model.

6.3.3 Identifying Examples of Giftedness in Popular Culture

While the girls could recognise talented people and characters, and used the term 'talented' to describe them, they had not previously identified themselves with these personalities. As they described themselves and their attitudes to achievement and aspiration, the girls did not believe that their style of 'being a gifted girl' was present in popular culture. Their definition of giftedness reflected the images of giftedness they had gleaned from popular culture and

included descriptive words such as *geek*, *nerd* and *boring*. They felt that giftedness was represented by fictional characters who did not have high status, but who were odd sidekicks to the main character. It was the main character who met societal expectations for success. The girls did not agree with the popular culture representation of gifted individuals as odd because they saw themselves as normal, and not as the types of characters presented in the media.

Popular culture was constructed for an audience who demanded excitement and difference and the girls rationalised that producers of popular culture chose to make the gifted individuals unusual to meet this demand. They felt that to show gifted characters in reality would be boring. This is an important reflection of how they themselves believed the stereotyped image of a gifted individual as a social outcast, a nerd or a geek, despite how they had described themselves at other times and indicated that popular culture did not provide young girls with role models to support their academic capacities. It tended to satirise their features and treated them as typecasts who, despite being humorous on the screen, present unappealing models to young people (Vialle, 2007).

The girls were able to identify women in popular culture who they felt displayed talent but were still constructed to meet expectations of physical beauty and appearance. The real women they admired were older women, who had achieved in a number of areas. A noticeable feature of some of these women was that they advocated for important issues and were not afraid to make a stance about originality, independence and aspiration. However, the girls felt that the media tended to play down the issues the women stood for, and report more regularly on their appearance, diet and clothing. The younger girls responded strongly to the manipulation of images to meet expectations and were outspoken about how this might impact on young girls seeking inspiration. The older girls appeared more able to separate from this and to choose their idols based on personal criteria. However, they were sometimes silent about this until asked directly.

6.4 The Impact of Age on Responses to Popular Culture

The case study groups of focus girls in this research explained how they understood and utilised a number of levels of engagement with popular culture, and demonstrated that they had considerable access to different sources of popular culture. This confirmed the literature

that described the strong presence of popular culture in the daily lives of young people, supported by easy access (Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). For age groups across adolescence, the impact popular culture has on the growth of identity and confidence has been explored by many authors (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006; Nash, 2006; Renold & Allan, 2006; Walkerdine, 1990). All the girls involved in the research were avid consumers of popular culture: sharing it, responding to it, connecting to it and using it as a personal tool for communication with friends. Girls have been recognised as key consumers of popular culture and as avid readers and fans of the people who appear in the content, either fictional or real (Charles, 2010; Cheu, 2007; Kearney, 2006; Nash, 2006; Pipher, 2004). This research found that in general, girls in early adolescence and early high school (the Year 7/8 group), had some different responses to popular culture than the older girls who were moving into senior high school (Year 10/11). This difference showed in the way the girls had the capacity to critically understand and respond to the multi-modal messages, and in their interest in and compliance to, the substance of these messages.

All the girls were comfortable with the pervasive presence of popular culture in their lives, and familiar with a range of modes of presentation and examples of content. Across the age span of the Australian high school years, the typical young person develops their own sense of identity and rehearses ways to be in their world. They seek information outside of the family group to learn about behaviours and to consider different viewpoints. Luyckx et al. (2006) described this period in their lives as a key, and extended, growth period in terms of identity, self-knowledge and personal understanding. Some difference in social and emotional development over this time would be expected.

In this group of rural girls, there was not strong evidence that their confidence and preparedness to be recognised as different reduced over the time of adolescence, as suggested by several researchers (Goldsmith, 1987; Kline & Short, 1991; Klein & Zehms, 1996; Nelson & Smith, 2001; Pipher, 1994; Ryan, 1999; Reis, 2002; Schober, Reimann, & Wagner, 2004). The girls attributed their confidence to their family, their friends and their experiences, more than to the messages they received through popular culture. The combination of positive family support, a strong achievement-oriented peer group and a school environment that allowed for familiar and long term relationships appears to have allowed the gifted girls in this study to be confident and self-assured about life and their future by the time they were in

the later years of high school. While popular culture provided a set of information, these girls felt that their community also had an impact on how they perceived themselves in terms of future prospects and direction. This concurred with the work of Massey et al. (2008) around goal setting, and Walshaw (2006) and Sanders and Munford (2008) who described the influence of family and community in rural settings on the aspirations of young gifted girls, highlighting the power of family on such decisions, even if only by suggestion or modelling. High personal confidence was contradicted by a less developed assurance in terms of body image and physical appearance, with consistent references to particular concepts of beauty (Renold & Allen, 2006) as presented in the media. For both groups, beautiful was defined at a surface level as meeting societal norms as shown in the media, including features such as glamour, thinness, clear skin, blonde, long hair and a pretty face (Cheu, 2007; Durham, 2008; Hamilton, 2008; Renold & Allen, 2006; Signorelli, 1997; Ward & Harrison, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009). There was evidence that the girls did seek to align their appearance with the messages, even as they talked about not needing to do so. The younger girls reacted critically against the expectation that they would need to change their natural appearance to look the 'right' way for their social group, but became more compliant with the stereotyped expectation over their first twelve months of high school. By Year 10/11 the girls had more diverse role models for physical appearance, but still reflected this expectation at times. How they looked was important and looking right meant having hair styles and clothing that blended with their peers. Television and mainstream popular culture presented both a sanitised and consistent view of thin, blonde, clear-skinned young women in the form of the 'Disney princess' and many Disney girl characters (Cheu, 2007), as well highly sexualised images of girls that highlight physicality and suggestive clothing (Hamilton, 2008; Pipher, 2004).

A focus in literature and popular media has been the impact the number of highly sexualised images evident in the media has on the way a young girl sees herself in her own eyes, and in the eyes of others (Bragg, Buckingham, Russell, & Willett, 2011; Buckingham, 1993; McRobbie, 2009; Vares, Jackson, & Gill, 2011). Both age groups were critical of girls in their respective cohorts who chose to follow examples and dress in ways that highlighted their sexuality. They felt that such an image was not appropriate for girls. These girls chose to copy what they saw in varying degrees, while also making their own style choices. In their reported choices, they mirrored both their real-time social connections including peers and

families, and the images in the media. This was an interesting conundrum and suggested that girls use a range of sources to establish different facets of their identity, and that some individuals were more influenced by popular culture than others. While popular culture was an important source of information about appearance, its message for these girls was tempered by local influences.

Identity development occurs across adolescence as young people establish their values, world view and independence from family values and ideals. Consistently across the age groups participating in the research, these girls were confident and future oriented, seeing for themselves many different possible careers, believing they would travel and live happy lives that included families and positive relationships. Literature suggested that popular culture was an instructional tool for girls, describing the behaviours and physical attributes that are deemed socially acceptable (Bentley, 2004; Harris, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009). It was difficult to discern which of their decisions came solely from popular culture and which came from other influences. The girls involved in this study epitomised the 'can do' girl as described by Harris (2004), but they also demonstrated that they garnered information about doing girl in their context from a range of local sources, and that popular culture was only one influence on their choices. Even though popular culture was criticised for the way it positioned young girls through its images and the sub-textual messages delivered in the plots, characters and visual presentations in the right way to 'do' girl (Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, 1990), the girls in the case study groups were positioned in roles by their families, their peers and their teachers as well as by the way they saw women positioned in the media.

At the outset of the study, the Year 7/8 girls had recently left their primary schools, where long term relationships with teachers and peers had given them strong bonds, a sense of place and leadership opportunities that came their way because of the intellectual abilities and strong personalities. Over their first year of high school, there was a shifting in the social groups and connections, as groups from different feeder schools synthesised into new groups. Some girls felt an increased anxiety about their place in the social strata and began to adjust their expectations and their appearance to fit in. Their identity was challenged and during Years 7/8 this led to self-criticism and a sense of change. Popular culture provided a common core of conversation, people and ideas. Knowing the right stories and people gave a sense of acceptance. The need to conform to peers in this way was stronger in girls in early

adolescence than in later years (Dederick et al., 1977). Indeed, by Years 10/11, after four years as a cohort, the girls discussed and debated the concepts and issues shown in popular culture rather than the life stories and plot lines of shows.

As a small sample of girls in this rural setting, the participants in this study displayed a sense of personal power that was reflected in the way they spoke about their relationships with teachers, their families and males in their social circle, and in the way they confidently produced a number of goals for their future lives. While they do not represent every girl, they represent a set of girls who are present in regional schools. Both age groups listed a range of influences in their lives that included friends, family and teachers, as well as popular culture. Context was predicted to make an impact on the capacity of adolescent girls to critically interpret and respond to the messages presented in popular culture about success and achievement (Charles, 2010; Hamilton, 2008). While Charles's study was completed with Australian girls in an elite school setting, and Hamilton had a much broader sociocultural sample, neither conclusively found that girls were able to fully understand how popular culture manipulated them, and how real life success was achieved differently to that shown in the media.

The girls in early high school (Year 7/8 group) responded literally to the messages in popular culture and identified examples consistent with expectations. They talked more about the content they engaged with. They showed a high interest in the mediated characters and imitated them as they spoke about them. When they recounted article content there was a tendency to believe the content, and to not question the opinions and information about the lives of individuals. However, the younger girls were sceptical about the truth in visual images, and their conversation kept returning to the techniques used to ensure the visuals presented met specific social expectations. They were critical of the possible changes made to the images, and bothered by how this presented an untruthful image to the audience. This appeared to concern them more than the constructed truths they identified in written texts. As they consumed this material they were more likely to idolise and obsess about their favourite stars, and to collect images and quotes from them. Their journal pages contained multiple images and handwritten copies of quotes from their favourite artists or celebrities.

As the Year 10/11 girls talked about popular culture they recalled what they had learned in their English classes in Year 9 and presented their own theories. They talked broadly about the concepts and ideas that were presented in popular culture, using general definitions, and appearing well informed of non-mainstream popular culture. As they talked they did not appear to recognise that independent popular culture was in fact a subset of mainstream popular culture. Year 10/11 recognised that popular culture could be something that was created by a group, recognising it as an expression of normal within that group. They related it to trends and noted that while trends might begin with popular culture characters or material, they were also started at a local level because of the actions of an individual and the responses of the group. The older girls were more individual in their responses to the messages and ideas presented in popular culture, and in general, their goals for the future did not connect directly to popular culture.

Year 10/11 girls were very engaged with music-based popular culture, including music videos, live performances and text information about musicians and their lives. They listened to a diverse range of music and knew the details about many artists, judging them based on the way they retained their individuality or changed to meet expectations. While Year 7/8 girls were entertained by musicians, and had idols and favourites, they did not speak at length about the production of music videos and the way that music is presented in popular culture. Many of the Year 10/11 girls were involved in music activities themselves and perhaps identified with these artists more closely than actors or those involved in other media.

Both age groups of girls described the constructed nature of popular culture, and were able to recognise that its construction was about attracting, and engaging, audience attention. While the older girls understood this and were able to explain it, the younger girls simply reacted to the construction techniques and results, and the need to meet audience expectation. They were not always able to separate their emotive responses towards the images from a more objective perspective as they responded to the media. The older girls were more aware that the creators of popular culture sought to fulfil the needs of the audience and give them what they wanted to see. They recognised that the audience had expectations about what they would see or experience, and that this need impacted on the way popular culture was both constructed and presented. Overall, both groups of girls appeared to see popular culture as something outside of their realm of influence, and were not aware of the power they had as

audience to impact on the construction, success or ongoing development of popular culture. Kearney (2006) discussed the importance of allowing young people to become creators of popular culture to develop their critical understanding of it in their lives. None of the participants had significant experience creating any forms of the media represented in popular culture, and so had not thought about the way they might be able to use it to change public perception or expectation, or the power that this would give them for expressing their own views and ideas about their role as was suggested in the literature (Kearney, 2006; McRobbie & Garber, 1991).

Across adolescence there was a difference in the way the girls responded to, and engaged with, the content of popular culture. Older girls had the requisite thinking skills to consider a range of perspectives when considering their responses to popular culture, whereas earlier in adolescence the girls became focused on only one aspect (the manipulation of visual images) and were drawn into the content of the shows they watched and the magazines they read. While this constitutes a difference in the way girls responded to popular culture at different stages in their adolescence, there is also a similarity in terms of its place in their lives and their regular use and engagement with the various modes of popular culture. All the girls who participated in the research also used peers and family as role models, sources of information and advice and examples of how to dress and act. Popular culture was one of a number of places where adolescent girls could get support in developing their sense of self at significant points in adolescence.

6.5 Does Popular Culture Support or Disrupt Talent Development?

The girls who participated in this research project described how popular culture delivered messages about their ability, their future and useful skills. However, they also discussed the way they received messages from other people in their lives that contradicted the pervasive messages from popular culture. They articulated their own plans for their future and had a sense of their own identity and agency in their worlds. On the surface, the talent development of these girls was not disrupted by the presence of popular culture in their lives.

However, they were not always able to recognise the influence popular culture was having on their thinking and choices, and some girls admitted that they found themselves unable to resist the messages inherent in the content they engaged with. The frequency with which they were exposed to the messages, in all the sources of popular culture they engaged with, did impact on their sense of what they should be doing to meet societal expectations. Within the scope of the data collected for this research, it was hard to discern how strongly it impacted on an individual's response that was dependent on a range of chance factors including family situation, personal esteem, the network of friends and mentors, and opportunity. Gagné (2008) suggested that chance played an indefinable part in the development of talent.

6.5.1 Popular Culture as a Disruption to Talent Development

This study has shown that popular culture influenced what the girls believed they needed to do to be successful and what they should prioritise in their lives. There were distinct concepts the girls learned from exposure to popular culture about talent. They did not see women striving for academic success, or achieving goals of leadership or promotion through hard work. The success of the women they talked about in popular culture was attributed to their appearance and their ability to manipulate those around them to achieve their goals. Celebrity icons attracted their attention because of their antisocial behaviours or their personal life styles. The impact of this messaging changed as the girls grew older, and varied due to the impact of other influences in their lives.

Popular culture did not suggest to the girls that talent development was about personal characteristics, rigorous, persistent work or meeting challenges. The girls felt that showing the lives of academically gifted individuals would not meet the entertainment needs of the

audience. Literature supported the premise that popular culture reinforced stereotypical views of woman's capabilities (Cheu, 2007; Fabrianesi, Jones, & Reid, 2008; Signorelli, 1997, Walkerdine, 1990; Wohlwend, 2009). Such reinforcement could disrupt the aspirational thinking of gifted adolescent girls, although the concept that women's success is connected to multiple sources of inspiration and support—including external barriers such as social class, family, education, expectation and location and internal barriers such as confidence, self-esteem and a sense of needing to please others—is well supported (Ambrose, 2003; Freeman, 2004; Gilligan, 1982; Grant et al., 2000; Greene, 2006; Lea-Wood, 2004; Leung, Connoley, & Scheel, 1994; Mann, 1994; Perrone, 1997; Reis, 1998; Vermulean & Minor, 1998; Walshaw, 2006).

6.5.1.1 Role Models

Through fictional characters and celebrity icons, popular culture delivered messages that underwrote the way girls believe they needed to be. Regular characters and celebrities were presented as role models for girls, influencing their esteem and their aspirations (Fabrianesi, 2007). If the participants were not sure of which product to buy, they were influenced by the particular celebrity who advertised the product and by articles in magazines that advised on best buys. As they talked about celebrities, the girls noted how they modelled behavioural cues and ways of relating to others in various relationships. Many of the images in popular culture reflected a stereotyped expectation that they, as girls, would focus on a physical appearance that would attract a male partner who would then support them, even if they continued to work. Exposure in the media to consistently thin, toned and flawless bodies is directly related to body dissatisfaction in young girls (Bentley, 1999; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006a, 2006b; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Tiggemann, 2003, 2005, 2006; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). Such an intense focus on the body potentially leads girls to prioritise physical appearance as a key element of success and not to recognise that talent development includes a range of cognitive and emotional facets.

6.5.1.2 Academic Achievement

The girls did not consider that popular culture delivered a message that supported academic success as a way to make an individual popular, or that such success takes effort and time. Their descriptions of gifted girls presented in the media included words such as boring, dull, non-popular, quirky or odd. When participants were asked to identify a gifted girl in popular

culture, Lisa Simpson was identified, and while it was acknowledged that she was able to achieve academically, the salient features of her character in the discussion were noted as her inability to interact successfully with other girls, and her poor social skills overall. There was a common view from the girls that gifted characters were the sidekicks and not key characters. This is supported by Williams (2007) in her commentary on the presentation of literate behaviours in popular culture. A lack of presence in popular culture of gifted young women, confidently demonstrating their academic talents and receiving acclamation for this, does not send a message that talent development is important. Gifted girls experience a decline in self-esteem and confidence over adolescence (Capper et al., 2009; Chan, 2001; Colangelo & Assouline, 1995; Harter, 2006; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Kline & Short, 1991; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Reis, 2002) and popular culture does not highlight the advantages of demonstrating ability. While the older gifted girls in this study were confident in their supportive and familiar environment, their conversation demonstrated that their lived experience of popular culture's representation of talent development was that education and academic effort were not priorities for females.

6.5.2 Popular Culture as a Support to Talent Development

There appeared to be an overwhelming amount of evidence that suggested that popular culture was potentially a disruptive influence on the talent development of gifted girls, both in the data gathered from the two cases presented in this study and in the concomitant literature. This study, though, was seeking to establish if it was a disruption or a support for talent development in rural gifted girls. It could be argued that some aspects of popular culture offer support for talent development, especially for rural girls who have a limited experience with diverse people and careers (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2008; Arnold, 1991; Cross & Dixon, 1998; Clark & Zimmerman, 2001). There is a gap in the existing literature with regard to gifted learners in rural settings in Australia, and in the literature, looking at the impact of popular culture on gifted girls. Rural gifted girls, as a subset of both groups, have attracted little attention.

6.5.2.1 An Influence on Life Decisions

Rural settings are diverse and the experiences that rural gifted learners have in childhood and into adolescence reflect this diversity (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2008). Family, peers, teachers and community elements vary according to context. Aspects such as isolation from

major metropolitan centres, the economic base of the community, the size of the population and its socio-cultural make-up change the resources and opportunities available. The participants in this study reflected this diversity. Some girls lived in the large regional city and their lives included easy access to the Internet, and families who provided them with varied experiences. Other girls lived a distance out of town, did not regularly visit large metropolitan areas and had little experience outside their current setting. For some there was not reliable online access. While some of the girls had been overseas, others had not. Family situations varied, although all of these girls lived in families where there was at least one parent working. Parental attitude to the value of education varied but all the girls wanted to leave the regional area and study or work elsewhere. The data showed that the girls continued to have supportive relationships with their families. In both case groups, the girls identified their families as a key source of influence in their lives, providing support and advice. A rural family potentially had a greater influence on the aspiration of a gifted child (Glendenning, 1998), sometimes limiting their view of their future. If this were so, access to the range of different views and ideas that popular culture could provide would suggest it as a source of support for talent development. In this study, both popular culture and the family have had an impact on the girls' aspiration and talent development.

6.5.2.2 Career Options

The two case study groups were able to suggest a wide list of possible careers, most of which included further education away from their home base. Parents were acknowledged as being actively involved in some of the suggestions, aligning with the findings of Schmitt-Wilson and Welsh (2012) who noted a strong correlation between the career expectations of parents and the perception of parental expectation by adolescents. Most of the girls in the research project did not plan to follow in their parents' career pathway. It appeared that these girls had knowledge about different careers and pathways for their lives, which they had learned about through a range of sources. They did not appear to experience the limitation of knowledge and experiences with different career models that Bailey et al. (1995) suggested was an aspect of living in a rural area. They did note that they were able to learn about careers from movies, magazines and television, even though they also acknowledged that what they saw shown on popular culture was often the less stressful aspects of any career. From recent popular television series, the girls described the insights that they had into criminal

investigation, medical careers and journalism, although an emphasis on the fashion industry remained.

6.5.2.3 An Interest in Travel

When the girls completed a timeline of their future goals, travelling was a significant aspiration. When asked about their choices they indicated that they wanted to explore places made familiar through popular culture. The urge to travel was identified in Johnstone and Lee's (2009) analysis of responses to comments made in The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, as a common goal among the younger, rural, Australian women who took the survey. Despite the younger age group of participants in the current research, they echoed a similar aspiration to travel. These younger girls appeared to have been provided with information about different locations through their engagement with popular culture and this had inspired them to travel.

6.5.2.4 Female Role Models

At School B, the Year 10/11 girls admired the older sister of one participant, who had completed her education, owned a business and had a family. They talked about the model she provided them for their futures and felt she was someone to follow. Other groups talked about adult family friends who provided them with career ideas, as well as about their parents and the way their lives had modelled choices to make. The girls in the case study groups also talked about the women they had seen in visual or print media, both fictional and factual, who provided them with ideas about careers and roles in community and the home. These girls did not appear to feel they were unable to find role models, although their exposure to unusual careers did appear to be limited to women they knew through their family or teachers they met at school. For the sporty girls in Year 7/8, female sports personalities were mentioned as people to admire. In their rural community the diversity of careers was defined by the economics of the area. Popular culture was able to offer them a multitude of role models that their local community could not (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008). Magazines and Internet fan sites presented information about women who had achieved in the entertainment sector as well as in business, although the girls did not agree with every aspect of their lives. A rural area may not provide gifted girls with a variety of career options, or female role models, as they begin to make decisions about their future and form their self-identity (Battle & Grant, 1995). However, as a support to talent development, popular culture

content offered a range of different people and choices that were not available in their local community.

Few of the women in popular culture were living in rural settings, and this could lead to an assumption that rural women were not as talented or accomplished as women in urban settings. The data did not include any indications that this had been noticed by the girls. While they noticed differences between themselves and girls they knew in the metropolitan area in terms of confidence and experience in social settings, they felt that they, as rural girls, were more confident, diverse and less worried about peer pressure. In their context, they had a range of casual employment opportunities, freedom and a sense of security to engage in the community. Rural women have been found to be more proactive in making change in their communities, and in breaking traditional barriers to become involved in a range of activities (Fincher & Pannelli, 2001). While some of these rural gifted girls described their school lives as full of many different extracurricular activities, including leadership roles, sporting events and cultural events, similarly to the case study examples described by Battle et al. (1995), others expressed a sense of limited opportunity and pressure to conform to expectations, as noted in the work of Alloway and Dalley-Trim (2008).

The impact of popular culture as a support for gifted rural girls' talent development was not specifically discussed in the literature. Potentially, popular culture could serve as a rich source of very different lifestyles and experiences, and support gifted rural girls in understanding the opportunities that exist in different settings.

6.5.3 Responding to the Question: In What Ways does Popular Culture Support or Disrupt Talent Development for Rural, Adolescent Gifted Girls?

As adolescent girls work to establish their identity as separate from their family, they experience influence from a number of sources. Figure 6.2 illustrates the range of influences on the development of personal identity that emerged from the data. Talent development is identified in theoretical models as a process that includes a number of facets. Gagné (2008) described a longitudinal process that was impacted on by both environmental and intrapersonal catalysts; his model was not gender specific. Moon (2003) also developed a model of talent development that was not gender specific, although she indicated an

awareness of the need for gender specific support for girls. She, like Gagné, included personal attributes such as a strong sense of self. Reis (1998), Kerr and Larson (2007), and Noble et al. (1999) all described models of talent development pertinent specifically to women, that also identified the importance of intrapersonal skills and attitudes as drivers for talent development in women. While personal identity is identified in all the models as one of the catalysts impacting on talent development, none of them described the impact or importance of engagement with popular culture specifically as a factor in talent development. This is despite its acknowledged pervasive presence in the lives of adolescents in broad literature. The age of these models may explain this absence as in the last decade its influence and pervasiveness has emerged as an issue.

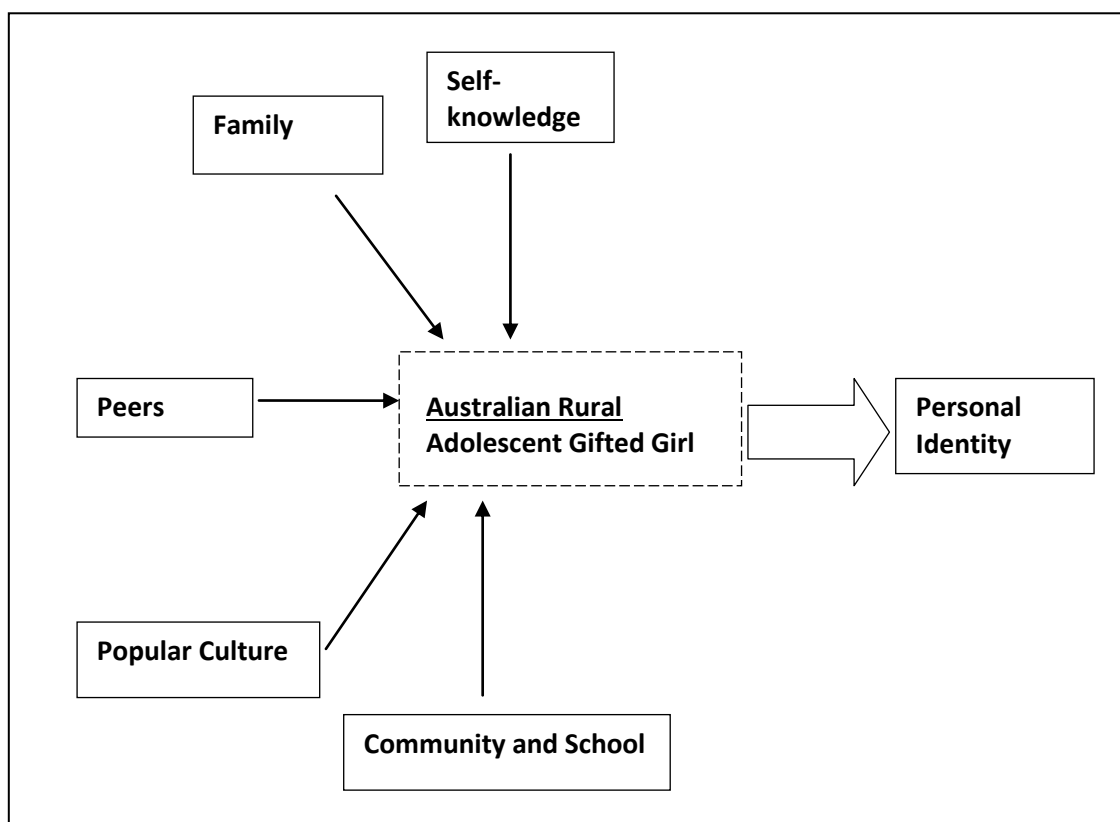


Figure 6.2: The influences on the formation of personal identity in rural, gifted adolescent girls

A considerable amount of literature focused on the impact of popular culture on all adolescents, and on all girls, frequently considering how popular culture delivers messages about being ‘girl’ (Driscoll, 2002; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006; Pecora & Mazzarella, 1999), and about physical appearance (Bentley, 1999; Tiggemann, 2003). There was literature on gifted girls, their emotional and social development, and their achievement in school. There was literature describing studies of their aspiration, achievement and school success

(Ambrose, 2003). In 2007, Vialle wrote about the paucity of knowledge about the impact that media and popular culture has on gifted students and the literature review for this project indicated this has not changed greatly in the intervening years. Gifted adolescent girls in Australian rural settings, and their talent development, have attracted even less reporting in the literature, and over the time of the study this also has not changed.

Such an absence has left some uncertainty around context-specific features of talent development for Australian girls. This study has shown that popular culture does impact on adolescent girls, reinforcing many traditional behaviours and attitudes for girls. It supported girls in finding ways to behave and respond to events, and it provided them with a ready source of information about clothing, hair styles and personal appearance. It provided guidance on social relationships and behaviours, and role models who girls admired and sometimes copied mimetically. The guidance may support their talent development, but it potentially disrupts it. The girls discussed its emphasis on appearance, finding a boyfriend and having a career that is glamorous, but not hard work. Its messages included a portrayal of gifted individuals as quirky and useful but not popular. Popular culture could be defined as an environmental catalyst (Gagné, 2008) that is filtered through the intrapersonal experiences of an adolescent gifted girl, forming part of the talent development process.

Conversely, the research has shown that popular culture appeared to also have the power to disrupt the talent development of adolescent girls because it influenced how they saw themselves, what they believed they needed to do to be successful and what they should prioritise in their lives. It delivered messages that underwrote the way girls believe they needed to be. Its images of beauty, its instructions on how to be successful, and its focus on relationships could apply pressure to some girls because they want to fit in. It did not deliver messages that supported academic success as a way to make an individual popular, or acknowledge that such success takes effort and time. It presented a stereotyped physical appearance and this was reinforced across all sources of media, with visual images that described how to create the right appearance, and information about ways to behave that highlighted either competing with others or using manipulative behaviours and relationships to achieve success.

The findings of this study paint an image of a group of rural, gifted adolescent girls, who spend a considerable amount of their time engaging with popular culture from various sources. From their conversation, and their reflections, I have been able to ascertain that they enjoy and are influenced by what they see and hear while engaged with popular culture. Their mediated vision of talented women comprised a woman who was lonely, manipulative, glamorous and mentored to change her ways to better meet stereotyped expectations as she sought a partner. The concept of an academic woman, enjoying the rigorous work of study and striving to achieve intellectual goals, was not present in popular culture without a side message of non-acceptance in the mainstream. If rural adolescent girls were only exposed to role models and the advice on being girl present in popular culture, it may in fact disrupt their pursuit of talent development.

However, for these girls, there was a range of other influences, including peers, teachers, families and their context. Because popular culture was not the only influence in the lives of these rural adolescent gifted girls, any disruption may not be ongoing. Popular culture has elements that offer support to gifted girls as they make choices about personal identity and how to utilise their natural giftedness to develop their specific talents. It is one of a set of influences that, when balanced, support adolescent gifted girls to undergo the practice, work and learning that leads to successful talent development.

6.6 The Talent Development of Rural, Gifted Adolescent Girls

A number of talent development models have provided background information to this study. The impact of popular culture on the lived experiences of these cases of rural adolescent gifted girls can be modelled, positioning it in the context of the girls' lives, and with reference to existing models of talent development.

These existing talent development models have informed the conceptualisation of the relationship between popular culture and the development of talent. Gagné's (2008, 2009) model of differentiated giftedness and talent formed the theoretical framework for examining the development of gifted girls. The concept of talent development as a longitudinal process influenced by a number of catalysts, both within a girl and within her environment has been drawn from Gagné (2002, 2008, 2009). For Gagné, these catalysts operate to support or

disrupt the developmental process, and for each individual this is a unique choreography of elements. Popular culture has been identified as a catalyst. The catalysts have been represented as sources of influence on the talent development process.

From the model proposed by Kerr and Larson (2007), I have considered the importance of personality and a strong sense of personal identity, including independence, responsibility, passion and curiosity, on the way a girl responds to popular culture. A strong sense of self would affect the way a young girl identified with the images and identities displayed in popular culture. From Kerr and Larson's (2007) discussion on the way women achieve eminence, I have included the impact of external factors, including family support for non-traditional career choices and resistance to stereotyped expectations and relationships. Many examples of careers in popular culture are traditional and girls assume the advice they are given is appropriate. A sense of personal purpose and drive related to a talent area that held societal worth, was a key facet of talent development in the model devised by Reis (1998) that has been appropriated as a factor in the power popular culture images hold. Moon (2003) suggested that disposition influenced talent development, and described the developmental process as a personal trajectory leading to both a high level of performance and a high level of life satisfaction. This has been interpreted as a culmination of aspirational thinking and action. For many of the women in popular culture, personal satisfaction came from showing the 'correct' appearance, and achieving within limited fields.

The model devised by Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1999) similarly included many personal facets of personality and opportunity. Its salient feature for this research is the domain of talent demonstration. Noble et al. (1999) defined the end result of the talent development process as being either in the public domain (eminence) or in the private domain (interpreted here as local eminence). Popular culture emphasises the world of fame and public achievement, where talent is displayed in full view of society. Literature identified a dilemma for gifted rural girls in striking a balance between moving away for talent achievement or remaining in the community and not reaching their potential, defined as global eminence. Noble et al.'s model suggested that value must be given for the displays of talent undertaken at local levels, which can support and enrich a rural community. The girls in the case studies felt they would need to leave to achieve their aspirations, although they reflected on the place

their parents, particularly their mothers, had in the local community. Further research could better define the place, and impact, of the talents of women in local or rural communities.

6.6.1 The Place of Popular Culture in Talent development: A Model

Figure 6.3 shows the initial model, reflecting the components drawn from existing models. To have the best chance of overcoming the impact of popular culture on talent development, a young girl needs to have a strong sense of identity, a balanced set of influences and a strong sense of aspiration. These three major components work together to filter the potential disruptions to talent development introduced through engagement with popular culture, while enhancing the supporting facets. When balanced, the components scaffold actions, decisions and behaviours that allow the girl to explore and develop in the area of her talent. If unbalanced in an ongoing and persistent way, it is suggested that the girl will struggle to achieve her potential.

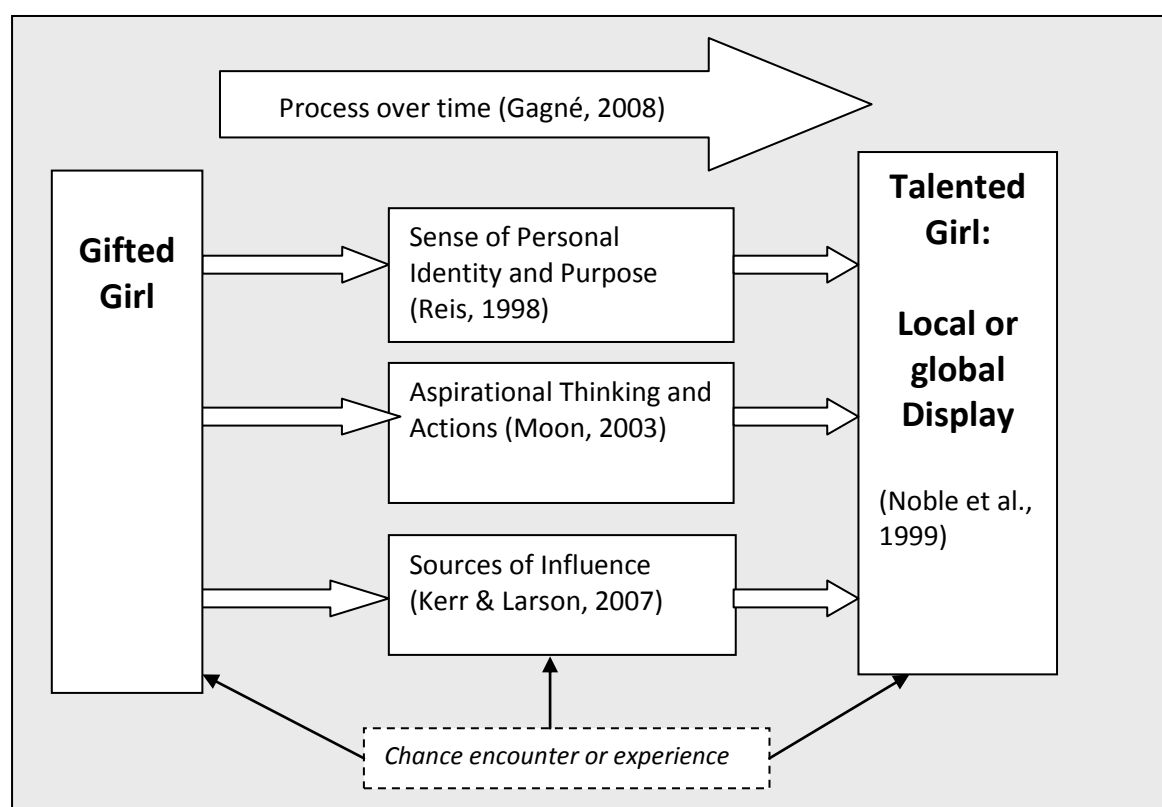


Figure 6.3: An initial model for talent development, showing derivation of the aspects

The data from this study demonstrated that popular culture is a source of influence on the talent development of rural adolescent gifted girls. It highlighted that there are other sources of influence on talent development, and suggested that it is the interplay of these sources that

defines whether popular culture disrupts or supports talent development. Figure 6.4 illustrates the breakdown of the sources of influence component and outlines the way that popular culture is both a potential support and a potential disruption. It highlights other sources of influence that could be addressed with further study. An overall balance between the elements over time would appear to be advantageous for talent development.

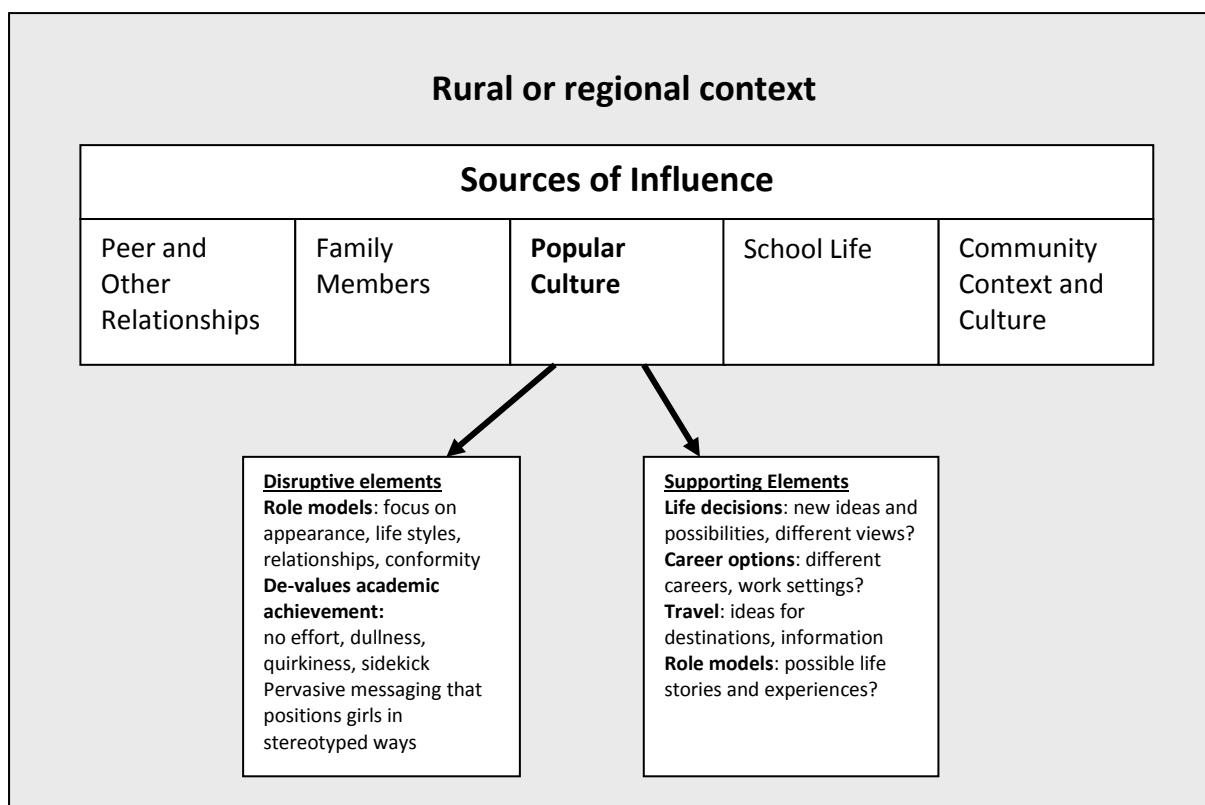


Figure 6.4: The sources of influence on the development of a girl's talent development

The data showed that there were three ways that girls responded to popular culture, and that this impacts on its power to influence their development. Figure 6.5 identifies these responses and highlights that they are interactive with both the individual and each other. The interdependence of these elements reflects the individual's experiences, and their ensuing process of development.

In his 2008 model, Gagné recognised that the individuality of each person changed the way the sources of influence were interpreted and acted on, seeing the intrapersonal catalysts as filters for the environmental catalysts. Possible filtering of experience was clearly evident in the data across the case studies—girls in the same school experienced the classroom differently, friends differently and their community differently, and had different levels of drive even when they had similar aspirations. Such individuality is vital to consider because gifted learners are diverse, and it is important to recognise the impact of an individual's sense of self and purpose on the personal trajectory of talent development (Moon, 2003).

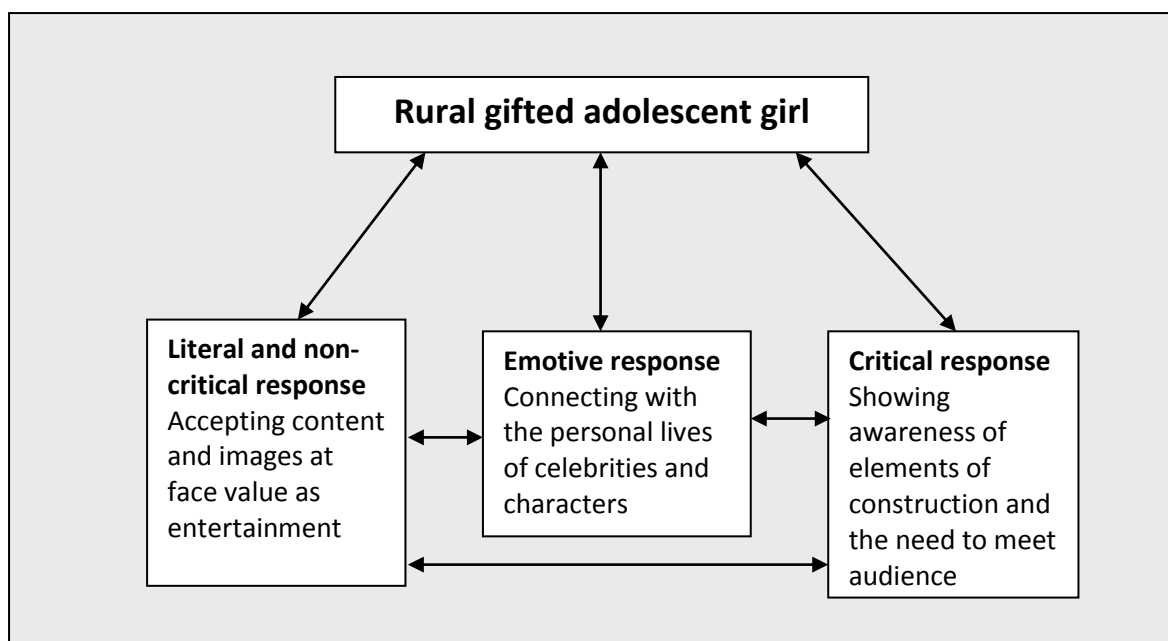


Figure 6.5: Interactions with popular culture as a source of influence

In responding to this, the initial model (Figure 6.3) has been reconfigured to acknowledge the relationship between popular culture and the various other sources of influence on girls, and show the relationships between the girl, the sources of influence and popular culture, including the filtering of the interactions through the sense of self to lead to talent development (see Figure 6.6 on p.319). The concept of chance remains evident in the model to represent the unknown experiences, people or opportunities that can happen at any time for any girl, or group of girls. Gagné asserted that, while informed planning and preparation is an important part of the talent development process, chance encounters remain a valuable possibility.

The model is set in the life stage of adolescence and the rural or regional context, shown by the foundation box that holds the components. It is a trajectory, moving from the identification of giftedness to evidence of successful talent development. Central to the concept of the model is the place of popular culture surrounding the gifted girl, and the other sources of influence that are part of the developmental process, towards the achievement of talent. Her responses to popular culture, as well as other influences that contribute to the process of development, are filtered through her sense of self to result in her talented performance. The sense of self that a gifted girl establishes throughout her adolescence is acknowledged in all talent development models as a vital force in talent development. The data showed that sources of influence on an adolescent girl's thinking include family, peers

and other relationships, school life and the community and cultural context. Aspirational thinking and actions include the drive to be creative and to succeed, a sense of value for one's gift and an expectation that it is possible to make a difference. These elements serve as dynamic catalysts shaping the responses a girl has to popular culture. Through the analysis of the data for this study, it became clear that, as in Gagné's 2008 representation of talent development, the sense of self acts as a filter for all the sources of influence and can be placed to illustrate this. Finally, the talented girl emerges. Her successful development is recognised in either her local setting or in a universal setting, when her products or actions result in recognition and acclamation, when she is identified as a leader or when her original contributions to an area of need are accepted and make a difference.

Working from the model, a program to support talent development would need to consider the building of a sense of identity for each girl, the balance of influences in their lives and ways of addressing any imbalance, and a clear message that successful talent development does not have to result in global eminence, but may be evidenced at a local or community level. While popular culture presents success as being signified by a standard view of beauty, attention to apparel and a drive to be the best, the girls in this case study, and the resultant model of talent development, describe success as being true to oneself and achieving personal goals and aspirations.

Adolescent: learning to be

Rural regional context

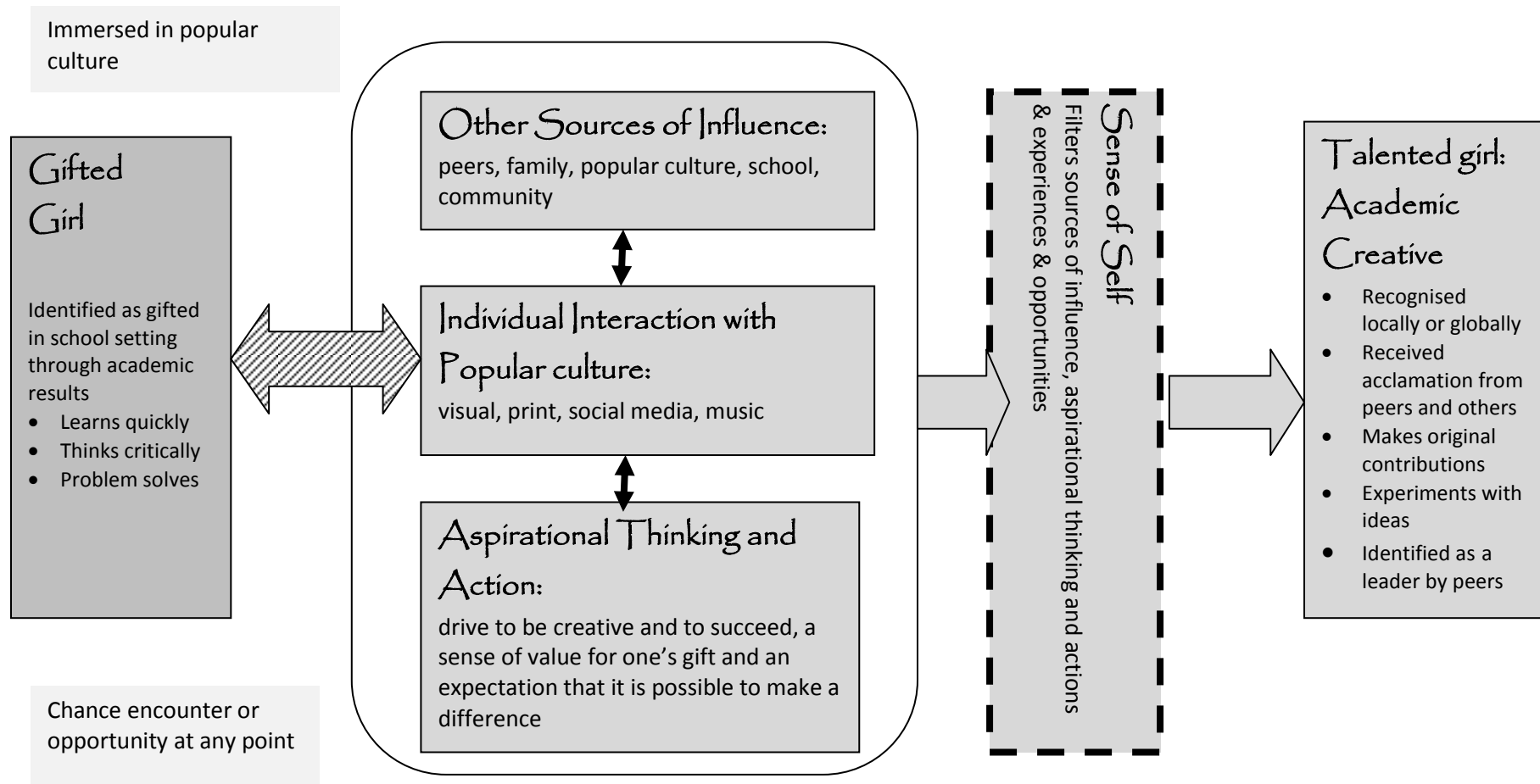


Figure 6.6: A model to describe the process of talent development for rural adolescent gifted girls

The striped arrow represents the three responses to popular culture found in the data: literal/non-critical; critical; and emotive.

6.6.2 Implications from the Research

The model, informed by the data, suggests important focus points for supporting adolescent gifted girls in rural or regional settings to filter the messages of popular culture, and thus to achieve talent potential. There are three areas that attract attention as possible content for programs, interactions or curricula for young girls. These are identity, the balance of influences, and an acknowledgement of the value of both local and global eminence (demonstration of talent).

6.6.2.1 Identity

The forming of personal identity, a key task of adolescence, is a process that includes experimenting with a range of possible persona (Moshman, 2005). Popular culture presents a multitude of images and role models for young girls, and encourages them to imitate and represent these images in their own lives. Young girls are initially positioned through family expectation and community norms to take on an identity that is either the norm for their family or one ascribed by cultural context as the accepted way to be. Despite its multitude of images, the consistency of appearance and behaviour messages result in popular culture describing a limited range of ways for girls to be, reinforced by the similarities in message across print and visual media. A girl may choose to imitate the images that she believes are presented as truth. Other girls may elect to take on an identity that is contrary to the one ascribed to her through popular culture, family or community. While Douvan and Adelson (1966) described such an identity as deviant, referring to negative or anti-social behaviours, it may be interpreted as taking on an identity that deviates from an established or stereotyped identity. Supporting a young girl to avoid being positioned in a certain way (Pipher, 1994; Smutny, 2007; Walkerdine, 1990) would address the disruption that constant exposure to popular culture may have on talent development.

Young girls need first to be able to know and understand themselves, and to be able to care for themselves as they try out new roles, experiment with identity and challenge expectation. Teaching mindfulness, relaxation and reflection, as well as the skills of communication and relationship, provides ways of responding to and managing stimuli, evaluating and assessing personal reactions and making decisions that support personal development. Young girls need to feel confident to speak their thoughts, to question the way they are positioned through media and expectation, and to have the courage to advocate for their needs and beliefs.

Providing young girls with the tools to express themselves in ways that defy the pervasive messages of popular culture would enable them to advocate, make a stance and share their identity. Supporting the skills of the production of media (Kearney, 2006), of public speaking and performance, and of writing and constructing texts, would allow girls to express their identity in a public way. Communication, self-expression, personal understanding and advocacy are the evidence of an individual confident in the sense of self, and able to articulate their identity to the world in general. A capacity to be reflective, a capacity to be mindful of one's needs in both mental and physical health, and the ability to self-manage and to set goals that are realistic and relevant indicates a sense of self that emanates from an inner strength and knowing rather than from external sources. Programs that facilitate this development within young girls in rural settings would enable them to seek and establish an identity that could successfully filter the various sources of influence and support the development of their talent.

6.6.2.2 A Balance of Influences

Evidence in this research found that there were a number of sources of influence on a girl's self-perception, her understanding of her intellectual ability and her future thinking and direction. While there was some interleaving of the sources through various interactions, each source of influence had a place in informing the girl of who she was and could be. Gifted girls have been identified as the wearers of a mask (Gross, 1998), whereby they change their behaviour and opinions to meet the expectations of others. Girls also have been commonly identified as demonstrating fan behaviour, shown by dressing, responding and behaving mimetically to show their admiration of an influence from popular culture (Fritzche, 2004). In school settings, girls choose to respond to teachers and classmates in ways that meet perceived approval, and to hide their ability, to become invisible (Betts & Neihart, 1988, 2010). As an adolescent girl seeks to establish her identity, the various sources of influence suggest different models. When balanced, these sources of influence offer support of development. When imbalanced they become a source of conflict and tension for the girl.

Providing girls with diverse role models, across extended periods of time, with different age groups, cultural backgrounds and experiences supports the balance of examples. Rural girls may not be exposed to peers, or other women, from diverse backgrounds, with diverse educational and occupational experiences. Limited opportunity to meet role models, to hear different stories and to offer their own stories for response and feedback may constrain their

understanding of what it is to be a talented female. Critiques of those who are different, bound in conversations about the future, serve to limit the possibilities for exploration. The balance of influences can be addressed by offering rural girls opportunities to meet with and learn from other, diverse people. It is important that they learn of women who have succeeded and achieved in non-stereotypical ways as part of any program. Opportunities may be through work experience, mentoring relationships, literature and autobiographies. Supporting young girls to take part in academic, cultural and sporting events with a wide group of participants and to engage in community activity whereby they are working alongside a range of ages, genders and culturally diverse community members will allow them to experience different perspectives and approaches to living.

An individual is better able to manage sources of influence if she has a strong sense of self, and the skills to critically listen, review and evaluate material presented verbally, visually, in print or through interaction. To support the balancing of influences, young gifted girls need to be taught the skills of critical literacy, including how to question, challenge and review content or information and to examine it for flaws, misconceptions and bias. Programs that teach these skills and role play responses to different situations, as well as components that focus on critical thinking and responding, would enable young gifted girls to understand the need to work towards a balanced set of influences.

6.6.2.3 Acknowledging the Value of Local and Global Talent

The final implication of this research includes the definition of eminence and its construction as both a local and a global phenomenon. In many instances, the girls noted that, while they admired a number of celebrities, eminence or major achievement was beyond the scope of their rural setting. Popular culture brings global fame into everyone's lives, and emphasises talent as being recognised beyond the immediate context. The icons and role models in popular culture were those who received national or international acclaim. Such a focus made the achievement of talent potential seemingly unattainable, or irrelevant, if the goal set addressed local or less newsworthy achievements. Learning about current and historical women who have made a difference at the local level, as well as the global level, or about heroes who bring change to communities, who persist in learning and work towards the resolution of local problems, who do not seek fame but work hard to address real life issues and concerns, would provide young girls with encouragement to value their individual

talents. Celebrating local female achievers and following life stories that illustrate effort and persistence would provide the girls with a sense of reality and possibility. Offering programs that engage girls in their community, in realising what they can contribute to those around them, and in playing leadership or mentoring roles to younger girls would support both their sense of self, and the balance of influences, and provide an experience of being an influence.

6.7 Limitations of this Research

This research project afforded a snapshot of two case study groups of girls: girls in Year 7/8 in two regional high schools in one community, and girls in Year 10/11 in the same high schools in the same community. It described their responses to the popular culture they most frequently engaged with: television, movies, music videos, magazines and the Internet. Most of the discussion focused on their responses to the messages delivered through visual and print media, as they did not all have frequent, open access to the Internet nor did they interact on websites created for girls. Key limitations centre on these two points. The findings and conclusions presented are only those of these girls. It is a small sample of adolescent gifted girls and this limits the relevance of the findings to other groups of girls in other settings. Popular culture was defined in this study by the experience of these girls. Its focus on limited sources may have resulted in a bias towards the messages delivered by these media.

A final limitation focused on the girls themselves. The identification of these gifted girls depended on broad based standardised tests that were not recognised intelligence tests. Although the girls achieved in the top quartile of both the literacy and numeracy component of these tests, and were further identified anecdotally by the schools because of the performance in class activity and testing, there was bias in the selection of participants towards those who were academically gifted. The girls themselves acknowledged that there were other girls they knew who could have been chosen as well. Because New South Wales government schools do not carry out formal identification of gifted students, the sample of participants, while identified as gifted in this context, may be unique to this study.

6.8 Recommendations for Further Study

There are a number of important conceptual ideas that could be followed up as a result of this research. Finding other groups of gifted adolescent girls and replicating the focus groups and

interviews in other settings, including an urban setting, a very remote setting, a coastal setting and a single-gender school would provide further snapshots of similar case study groups, and provide a rich picture of the responses that gifted adolescent girls have to popular culture. This would address the limitation placed on the results by the single location of the current study.

This study identified a number of sources of influence on gifted girls, including family, peers, cultural context and school life. Further studies into the way these sources influence gifted girls and impact on their talent development would provide deeper insight into the talent development process.

It would be interesting to include in further study an opportunity for gifted girls to construct their vision of a popular culture character who would define for them an effective role model to encourage younger gifted girls to confidently aspire to achieve their talent potential. As suggested by Kearney (2006), the opportunity to be a producer rather than a consumer of popular culture would empower adolescent gifted girls to position themselves and others as talented individuals, living out the local eminence that is so often ignored in popular culture.

6.9 Conclusion

Gifted adolescent girls in rural settings are an understudied group of gifted adolescents in Australian research. They face a dilemma of identity, identified at the outset of this research through a comment made by a gifted adolescent girl who struggled to make a choice between her ability and her appearance. Abundant literature on the relationship of all girls with popular culture is available and the impact of the content from popular culture is recognised as impacting on their identity as it develops. However, intellectual or academic ability is rarely identified as a variable. Gifted girls experience popular culture in all aspects of their lives, and little has been written about their specific relationship with it. This research undertook to explore the relationship between adolescent rural gifted girls and popular culture, and its impact on their talent development. Framed by the talent development model developed by Gagné (2008, 2009), but informed by models based on retrospective studies of talented women, the study was couched in feminist method. A multiple case study, looking at two groups of adolescent girls, at the beginning of their high school career and as they moved into senior school, provided deep insights into the lived experiences of gifted girls and their

interactions with popular culture. Popular culture was defined as not only the mediated information provided broadly in the community but also as the trends and expectations set by one's peer group. The older girls were more confident at defining popular culture in their context, linking it to their own lives.

Over the span of the high school years, the girls responded differently to the material and guidance provided in printed, visual and social media. Younger girls became more compliant with the images as they progressed from Year 7 to Year 8, changing their strong individual stance to one that more closely reflected the images and ideas presented in popular culture and adopted by their peers. Both case study groups (Year 7/8 and Year 10/11) identified that popular culture continued to present images of women that focused on appearance and stereotyped beauty, and that the presentation of gifted girls or women showed them as quirky or outsiders. Gifted women who were deemed successful retained the traditional characteristics of beauty, and were often lonely and manipulative. This was emphasised over their ability. The effort required to achieve talent, as outlined in the developmental process of Gagné's model, was not illustrated in popular culture. Rather the focus was on relationships, beauty and fashion.

There were a number of sources of influence in the lives of gifted girls and these sources intersected with the aspirational thinking and actions of adolescent girls, as well as with the world of popular culture that they were immersed in. Each individual girl filtered these influences through her own sense of self, and the findings suggested that it was the confluence of these three forces that drove talent development. Each girl experienced popular culture in a unique way, but common to all was the need to be able to critically review and understand how it was an influence on their talent development. Popular culture was potentially both supportive and disruptive to the process in the ideas, information and examples it provided.

Popular culture was a real force in the lives of the adolescent gifted rural girls who participated in the research. It provided them with role models, career information, travel inspirations and insight into a broader world than their immediate environment. This supported them to aspire to achieve their talent potential. However, it had the potential to disrupt this process when it offered role models that continued to be stereotyped, when it

downplayed the effort required to achieve success, and when it continued to position women as objects of entertainment or decoration or as manipulative individuals who did not work collaboratively. Through its emphasis on celebrity and glamour, it did not highlight the importance of achieving excellence at a community level or the importance of working with others in achieving talent.

In conclusion, this research has outlined a model that highlights the importance of supporting adolescent gifted rural girls to balance the different sources of influence, and to develop a strong sense of self, thus allowing them to emerge as talented girls and women, in either their local or the global domain. The study led to the conclusion that it is essential to provide adolescent rural gifted girls with critical thinking skills, diverse role models and real life experiences that broaden their world view and offer them chances to question and construct their own versions of talented women in popular culture.

The dilemma—will I be beautiful or will I be brainy?—can then be resolved.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Information Letter to School Principals

University of Wollongong



LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR PRINCIPALS IN DET SCHOOLS.

Dear

My name is Denise Wood and I am currently employed as a lecturer at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst. I am also studying for my PhD through the University of Wollongong. My research aims to explore the impact of popular culture on the talent development of gifted girls across adolescence in regional NSW.

The title of the project is: ***Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.***

The purpose of the research is to explore the impact that engagement with popular culture has on the development of gifted girls' view of themselves in terms of their academic ability and their identity. An understanding of the impact of popular culture and the messages it conveys about achievement and potential in academic areas on the well-being of rural gifted girls will inform the planning of curriculum and personal development support for gifted girls. It will build an understanding of their responses to educational opportunities, leading to suggestions for successfully engaging girls in continued academic learning. The voice of rural gifted girls who, despite appearing to do well, struggle with self image, stereotyped expectations and career choices, will be validated and can be used to inform educational planning in welfare and support contexts.

Participants for the project will be Year 7 girls and Year 10 girls in 2009. They will be identified as gifted through the following criteria (in alignment with the DET Gifted and Talented Policy 2004):

- Enrolment in an Opportunity Class in Year 5 or 6
- Results of ELLA/SNAP/ESSA testing
- Nomination by year advisor or school counsellor
- Participant in academic competitions or activities designated as gifted programs

I will require up to 5 girls in the Year 7 group and 10 in the Year 10 group.

The methodology for the project is qualitative in design and will utilise a series of focus groups, individual interviews and the completion of a media journal by all participants. The initial focus group will be in school time but others will be outside of school, at a time and place decided by the group. The minimum number of focus groups will be 5, and the maximum 8. There will be 3 between February and March 2009 and a further two in May 2009. The individual interviews will be in arranged outside of school time and will be held in mid-2009. All data will be collected by digital recording of focus group interactions and interviews. Participants will complete a journal in which they will be asked to write about their engagement with popular culture during the time of data collection and these will be collected for analysis but returned on completion of the project.

As well as your consent for your school's involvement, I am asking for a small amount of administrative support in order to identify students, make initial contact and provide a space for the first focus group. The project will benefit your school when, on completion, I can present to the staff summaries of specific data and the findings around gifted girls' identity and aspirations and work with your staff to develop programs to support gifted girls in their education. I see that this

Denise Wood
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information will support the following DET policies: Our Middle Years Learners, Our 15-19 Year Olds and the Boys' and Girls' Education Strategies.

This research has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Sciences, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, you can contact the Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

If you consent to this research being undertaken in your school please return the attached faxback to Denise Wood at 0263384417.

I am very happy to answer any further questions about the research and can communicate with you by email (dwood@csu.edu.au) or by telephone (63384698) at any time.

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FAXBACK RESPONSE.

Please fax your response to Denise Wood on 0263384417
By February 4, 2009.

Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.

I have read the information sheet about the above research project.
I consent to students of (school) _____
being invited to participate in the project.

I understand that I will be contacted by Denise Wood to make
arrangements for the project to be implemented in Term 1, 2009.

Signed: _____

(print name) _____
(Principal)

APPENDIX 2: Information Letter for Participants

University of Wollongong



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

Group 1: Year 7

Dear student,

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research project conducted by Ms Denise Wood as a student of Wollongong University. The project is titled:

Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.

This research project is about you and popular culture in your daily life. You have been identified as a gifted girl and so have been invited to be involved in the research.

The project aims to find out how gifted girls respond to the images in popular culture and how they see themselves in these images. It is looking at your talent development – how popular culture impacts on your self-image and your view of yourself as a gifted person. This information will help the researcher to develop programs that help gifted girls achieve academically and feel good about themselves and their abilities.

WHAT I WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO:

Your involvement in the project includes a possible three different activities:

Focus groups:	small groups that will meet over six months to talk about what you see and feel about popular culture, including television, advertising, music, movies and online sites and spaces. After the first one, these groups will be held outside of school time and will include afternoon tea.
Media Journal:	you will receive a journal to keep while the project is on. It is for you to write in, illustrate, collect images in and express your thinking about the popular culture you are using. This will be used in our meetings for discussion and collected at the end of the research for analysis. Your journal will then be returned to you.
Individual Interviews:	you will be invited to volunteer to take part in an individual interview to further explore the ideas you have about popular culture, outside of school time.

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University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone: (61 2) 63384698
dwood@csu.edu.au www.uow.edu.au

All our discussions and interactions will be digitally recorded and safe stored. After five years the material will be destroyed.

At any time you are free to choose not to continue your involvement. If you feel uncomfortable with our topics of discussion you will be free to not join in at that point. Your journal will be collected for analysis at the end of the focus group times, but it will be returned to you when the research is complete.

Findings from the research will be published in a thesis and possibly published in educational journals. All identifying features of the data will be removed to ensure that your input remains confidential. Your parents will also be asked to give permission for you to be involved. They have been given information about the project as well.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted you can tell your teacher, or parents or contact the University Ethics Officer, on 02 42214457.

If you would like to talk to more about the project and your possible involvement please email me on dwood@csu.edu.au or telephone me (63384698). I am happy to tell you more about the project so that you feel confident you understand what you would be doing if you participate. Please complete the attached consent form and return it to the office at your school by 25 March, 2009. I will then contact you to arrange our first meeting.

Thank you for your interest in the research project.



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Charles Sturt University
Bathurst, 2795.

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Consent Form for Children/Young People

Research Title: *Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.*

Researcher's Name: Denise Wood

I have read the participation information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any further questions I may have had. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time from the study without affecting my treatment at school in any way.

I understand that the risks to me are minimal in this study and have read the information sheet and asked any questions I may have about the risks. I understand that I will be involved in a number of focus groups and possible individual interviews and that I will be asked to maintain a journal over the period of time to use in the focus group discussions, which will be collected at the end of the research activity. My name will not be used to identify my comments or work in the study.

By signing below I am consenting to:

- Participating in an initial focus group during school time and a series of further focus groups with other students my age, outside of school hours between February and May 2009.
- Having a (possible) audio recorded interview with the researcher, asking me about my feelings and ideas about popular culture and giftedness, outside of school hours.
- Maintain a personal journal over the six months of data collection, which I will bring and use in focus groups, and which will be collected at the end of the research activity.

I understand that information from me will be used for a thesis and possibly other published studies and I consent for it to be used in this manner.

Signed: _____ (please insert your name) to participate in this research.

Parent/ Guardian Signature _____

Date _____ Name (please print) _____

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PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Group 2: Year 10

Dear student,

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research project being conducted by Ms Denise Wood as a student at Wollongong University. The project is titled: ***Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.***

This research project is about you and popular culture in your daily life. You have been identified as a gifted girl and so have been invited to be involved in the research.

The research aims to find out how gifted girls respond to and interpret the images in popular culture and how they see themselves in these images. It is looking at your talent development – how popular culture impacts on your self-image and your view of yourself as a gifted person. This information will help the researcher to develop programs that help gifted girls achieve academically and feel good about themselves and their abilities.

WHAT YOU WOULD BE ASKED TO DO:

Your involvement in the project includes a possible three different activities:

Focus groups:	small groups that will meet over six months to talk about what you see and feel about popular culture, including television, advertising, music, movies and online sites and spaces. After the first one, these groups will be held outside of school time and will include afternoon tea.
Media Journal:	you will receive a journal to keep while the project is on. It is for you to write in, illustrate, collect images in and express your thinking about the popular culture you are using. This will be used in our meetings for discussion and collected at the end of the research for analysis. Your journal will then be returned to you.
Individual Interviews:	you will be invited to volunteer to take part in an individual interview to further explore the ideas you have about popular culture, outside of school time.

All our discussions and interactions will be digitally recorded and safe stored. After five years the material will be destroyed.

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dwood@csu.edu.au www.uow.edu.au

At any time you are free to choose not to continue your involvement. If you feel uncomfortable with our topics of discussion you will be free to not join in at that point. Your journal will be collected for analysis at the end of the focus group times, but it will be returned to you when the research is complete.

At any time you are free to choose not to continue your involvement. If you feel uncomfortable with our topics of discussion you will be free to not join in at that point. Your journal will be collected for analysis at the end of the focus group times, but it will be returned to you when the research is complete.

Findings from the research will be published in a thesis and in educational journals. All identifying features of the data will be removed to ensure that your input remains confidential. Your parents will also be asked to give permission for you to be involved. They have been given information about the project as well.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted you can tell your teacher, or parents or contact the University Ethics Officer, on 02 42214457.

If you would like to talk to more about the project and your possible involvement please email me on dwood@csu.edu.au or telephone me (63384698). I am happy to tell you more about the project so that you feel confident you understand what you would be doing if you participate. Please complete the attached consent form and return it to the office at your school by 25 March 2009. I will then contact you to arrange our first meeting.

Thank you for your interest in the research project.



Denise Wood

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Consent Form for Children/Young People

Research Title: *Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.*

Researcher's Name: Denise Wood

I have read the participation information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any further questions I may have had. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time from the study without affecting my treatment at school in any way.

I understand that the risks to me are minimal in this study and have read the information sheet and asked any questions I may have about the risks. I understand that I will be involved in a number of focus groups and possible individual interviews and that I will be asked to maintain a journal over the period of time to use in the focus group discussions, which will be collected at the end of the research activity. My name will not be used to identify my comments or work in the study.

By signing below I am consenting to:

- Participating in an initial focus group during school time and a series of further focus groups with other students my age, outside of school hours between February and May 2009.
- Having a (possible) audio recorded interview with the researcher, asking me about my feelings and ideas about popular culture and giftedness, outside of school hours.
- Maintain a personal journal over the six months of data collection, which I will bring and use in focus groups, and which will be collected at the end of the research activity.

I understand that information from me will be used for a thesis and possibly other published studies and I consent for it to be used in this manner.

Signed: _____ (please insert your name) to participate in this research.

Parent/ Guardian Signature _____

Date _____ Name (please print) _____

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University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone: (61 2) 63384698
dwood@csu.edu.au www.uow.edu.au

APPENDIX 3: Information Letter for Parents/Caregivers

University of Wollongong



LETTER OF INFORMATION TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Dear Parent/caregiver,

Your child has been invited to participate in a research project conducted by Denise Wood, a doctoral student at Wollongong University. The project is entitled: ***Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.***

I am writing to seek your approval and assistance to involve your child as a participant.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH.

This research project seeks to explore the impact of popular culture on the development of self-identity and subsequent talent development in gifted girls from regional areas of NSW over their adolescence. Its purpose is to explore the lived experiences of gifted girls in rural Australian settings: their sense of identity, self-efficacy and aspirations in the light of their interactions with popular culture, which presents them with a range of the role models in magazines, television shows/advertisements, music videos, internet sites or movies. Understanding this impact on talent development will support the development of guidance for rural gifted girls in achieving their talent potential.

INVESTIGATOR	SUPERVISOR	SUPERVISOR
Ms Denise Wood	Assoc Prof. Wilma Vialle	Dr Jillian Trezise
Doctoral student	Faculty of Education	Faculty of Education
Faculty of Education	Wollongong University	Wollongong University
Wollongong University.	wvialle@uow.edu.au	jtrezise@uow.edu.au
dwood@csu.edu.au		
0263384698		

METHOD AND DEMAND ON PARTICIPANTS.

The research will be undertaken in a qualitative manner, involving a groups of participants that include ten girls in Year 7 and twenty girls in Year 10 in 2009.

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There will be three activities in this research, as shown in the table below.

Activity	Venue	Start Time	Finish Time
<i>Dates are approximate, & rely on availability of participants.</i>			
Initial Focus group: <i>getting to know you and explaining the project</i> March 2009	In classroom at the school, chosen by school personnel.	11.00 am	12.30 pm.
Subsequent Focus groups March 25/26, 2009 <i>OR</i> April 28/29/30, 2009 <i>OR</i> May 20,21,22, 2009	In Cresswell Room, Charles Sturt University.	4.00 pm Day to be negotiated	5.30 pm
Final focus groups June 23,24,25 , 2009	In Cresswell Room, Charles Sturt University.	4.00 pm	5.30 pm
Media Journal Completed at home between meetings.	Kept over time of focus groups by participants. Used in each focus group.	30-40 mins	2-3 times a week
Individual Interviews: <i>five participants from each group will be invited to volunteer</i> July/August 2009	In Cresswell Room, Charles Sturt University or at school. To be negotiated.	4.00 pm Day to be negotiated	5.00 pm

The research seeks to find out the feelings, responses and reactions of rural gifted girls to the images presented in popular culture, as well as their own ideas about academic achievement and the opportunities for gifted girls in later life. Understanding their responses and feelings will enable the development of relevant programs in schools to best support the talent development of rural gifted girls.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS.

All participation in the project is voluntary and participants will be free to withdraw at any time over the data collection period. Where participation causes discomfort parents/caregivers will be provide with contacts for counselling support and informed of the discomfort of the girl. Counsellor support has been arranged with the school if needed. The early focus groups will include trust-building activities in order to establish a safe relationship with researcher and other participants. It is assumed that some topics of discussion will be sensitive and participants will be assured that they

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can opt out of any discussion during a focus group if they feel the need to do so. The researcher has current child protection status.

All data will be safely stored in a locked cabinet or in digital locked file for five years, after which it will be erased or shredded. On completion of the research the findings will be reported through conference presentations, journal articles and presentations to staff in educational institutions. It is planned to utilise the information to develop support programmes for gifted girls, encouraging them to better understand themselves and their academic capacities.

Privacy of all participants and participating schools will be protected. No data will be released that identifies individual participants or schools involved. Only the researcher and relevant supervisors will have access to raw data. Names of participants evident in recordings will be deleted in transcriptions of data.

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This research has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Sciences, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, you can contact the Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

I am very happy to answer any further questions about the research and can communicate with you by email (dwood@csu.edu.au) or by telephone (63384698) at any time. Please return the attached consent form to the school for collection by Ms Wood. Involved participants will be contacted by March 22, 2009.

Thank you for your interest in the research project.



Denise Wood

School of Teacher Education

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Bathurst, 2795.

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Consent Form: Parent/Caregiver.

Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.

Denise Wood

I have been given information about ***Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.***

and discussed the research project with Denise Wood who is conducting this research as part of a Doctor of Educational Philosophy supervised by Wilma Vialle and Jillian Trezise in the department of Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include *minor discomfort at discussing personal ideas and feelings*, and have had an opportunity to ask *Denise Wood* any questions I may have about the research and my daughter's participation.

I understand that my daughter's participation in this research is voluntary, and she is free to withdraw from the research at any time. Withdrawal of consent will not affect *any other aspect of her life*.

By signing below I am indicating my consent for my daughter to

- participate in an initial focus group at school, in school time for 90 minutes and a further series of focus groups over a five month period of time (March – June 2009), out of school time on up to 7 occasions.
- complete a personal journal of media engagement that is to be used for discussion and analysis and that will be collected at the end of the time period.
- be invited to participate in individual interviews, approximately 90 minutes, with the researcher, after school hours at a time to be negotiated.

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for *a thesis and published journal articles* and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed _____

Date _____

Name (please print) _____

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University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone: (61 2) 63384698
dwood@csu.edu.au www.uow.edu.au

APPENDIX 4: Proforma of Journal/Log Pages

Beauty or Brains?
The impact of popular culture
on the choices made by rural gifted girls
in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.

This is the media journal of

Please use this media journal to record your interactions with popular culture in the next few months: your thoughts, feelings and questions about what you see and experience, and your thoughts and feelings about talent and talent development. You may want to include artefacts, illustrations, mementos, photos, personal writing as part of your reflection.

We will use this journal each time we meet as a stimulus for discussion.

You may fill it however you like – it will be returned to you when the research is complete.

Contact: Denise Wood (principal researcher)

(ph) 0263384698

(m) 0449252093

(email) dwood@csu.edu.au

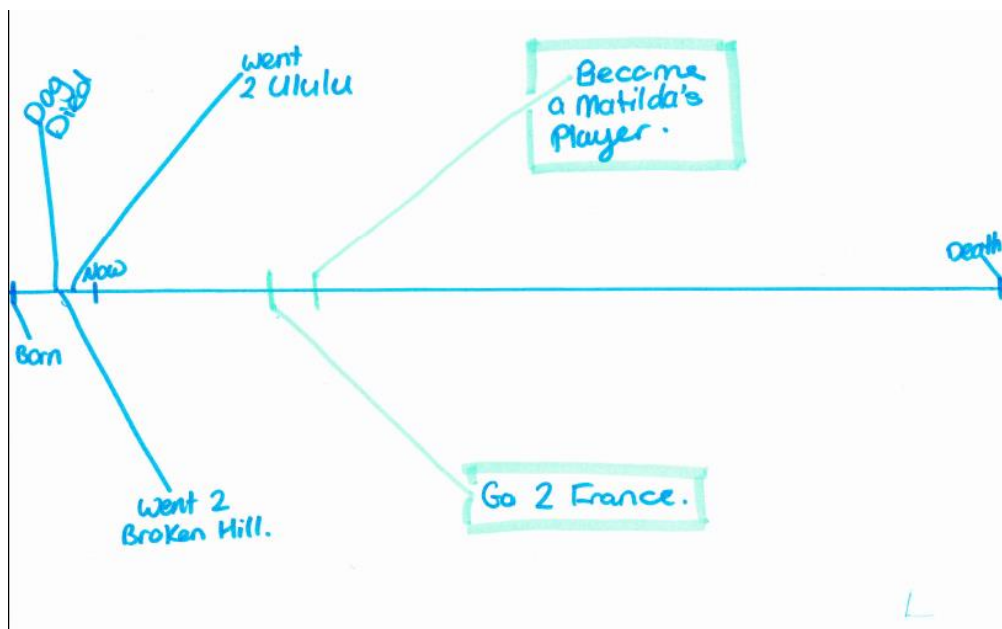
Sample of Log Pages

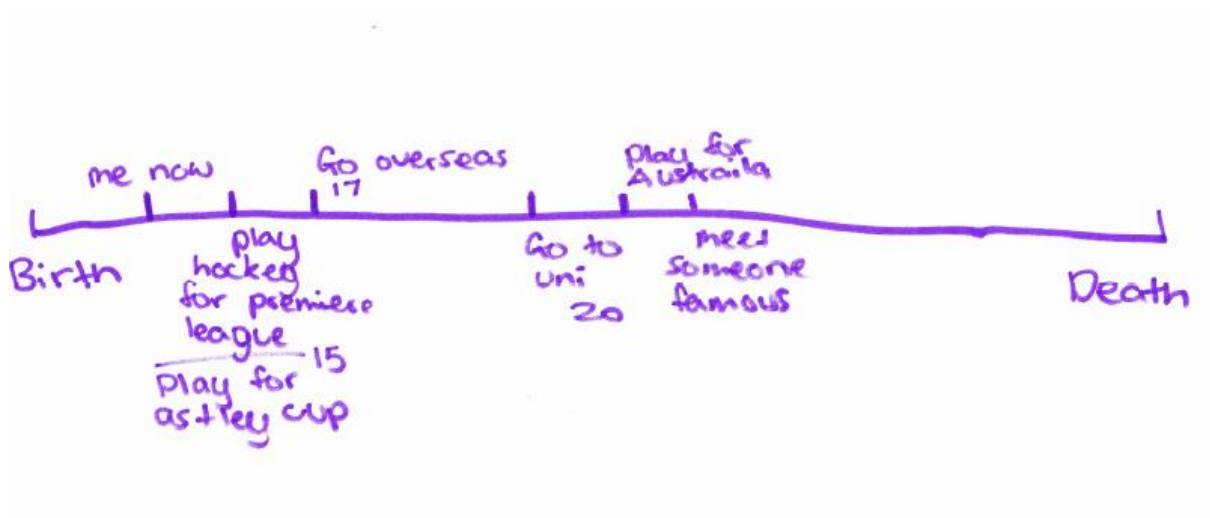
The following pages allow you to record your engagement with any forms of popular culture over the time of the project.

Day/date	Type of popular culture	How long you engaged with it	Describe what you did: Eg watched alone, watched with someone else, reading, talking to others, etc	Describe your thoughts and feelings as you watched, responding to the images and ideas presented

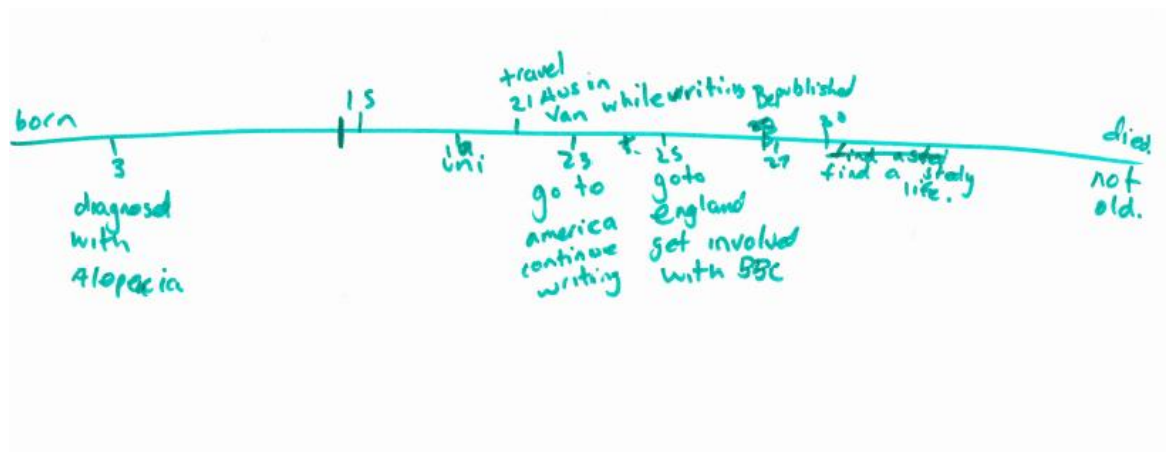
APPENDIX 5: Examples of Timeline Exercise

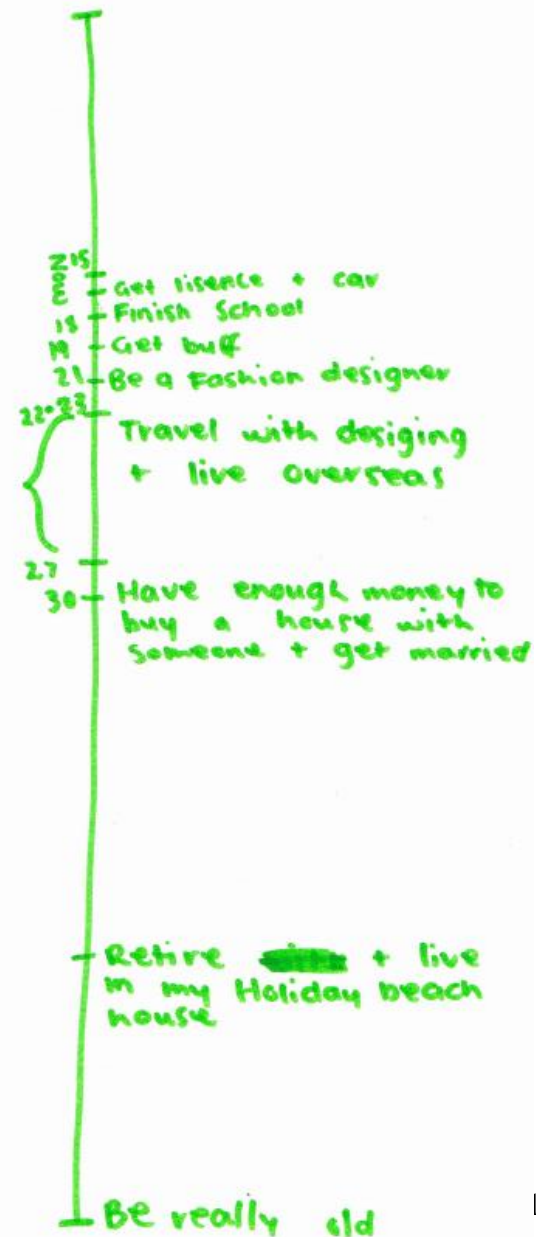
Year 7/8 Timelines School A and School B

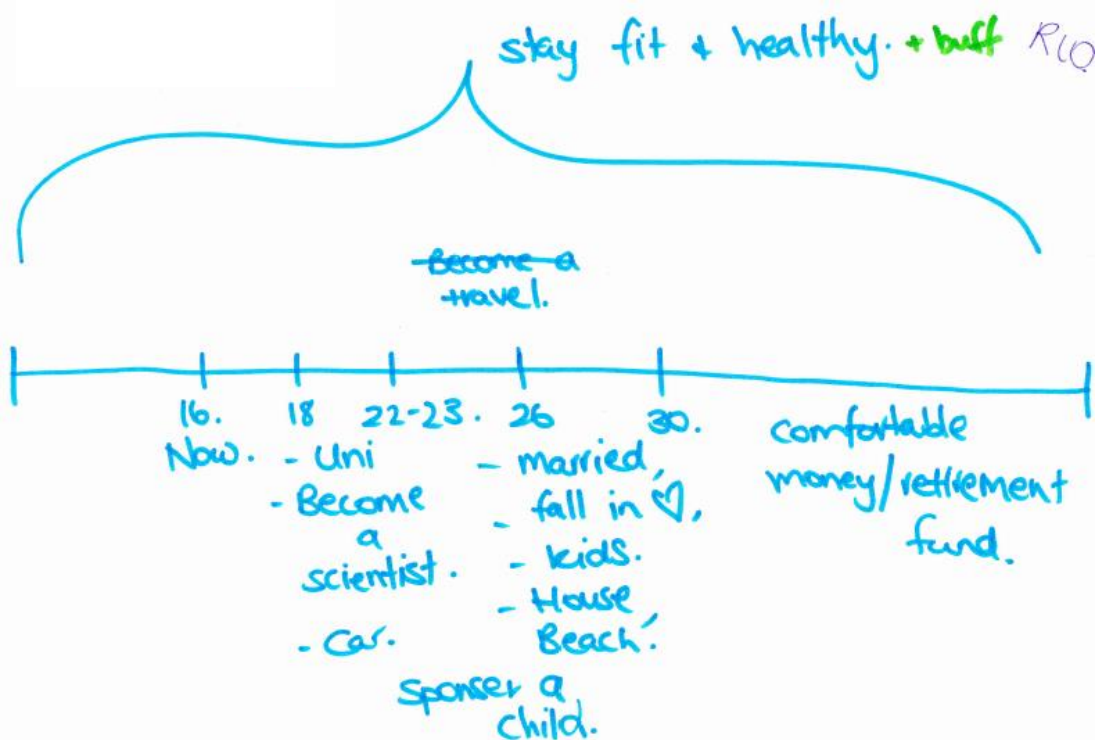
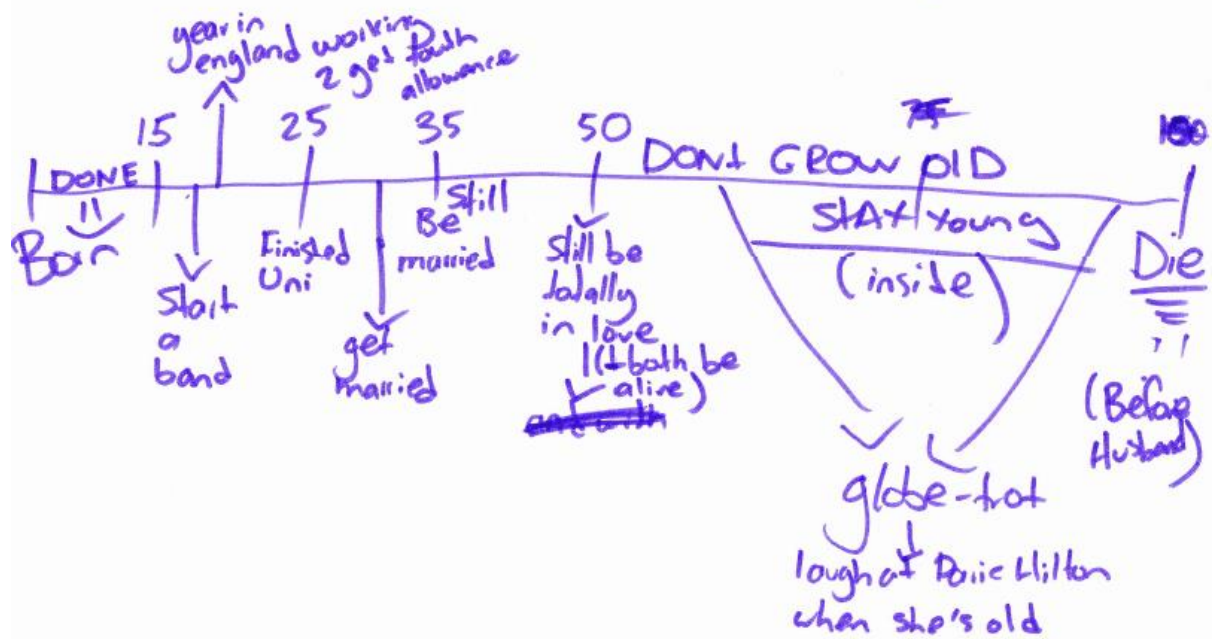


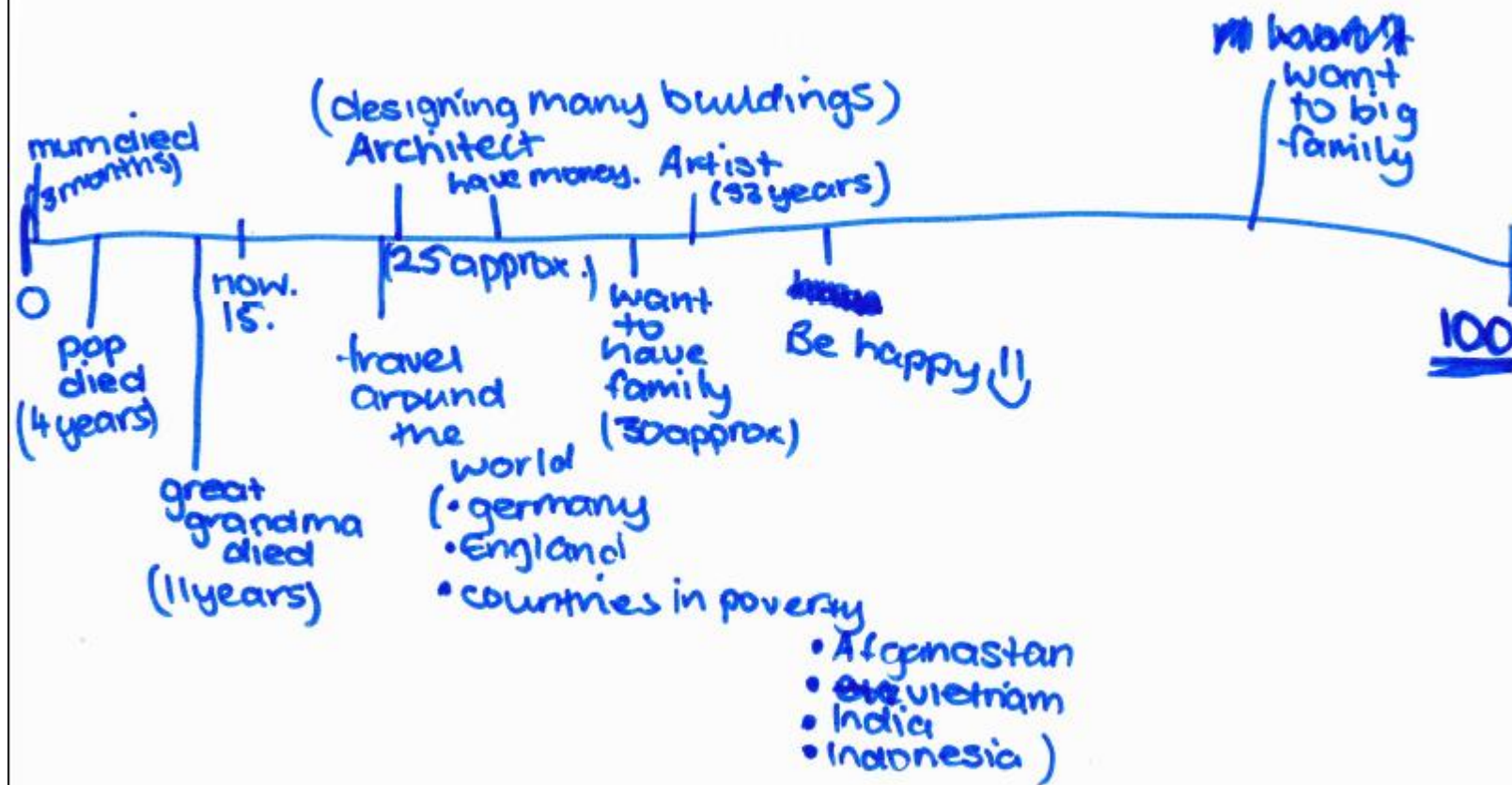


Year 10/11 Timelines, School A and School B









APPENDIX 6: Profile Completed by Participants

Your name: (this will be removed when analysis is complete)	
A nickname you would choose for you:	
Your age today (in months and years):	
Year at school:	
Subjects:	
Your family structure	
Position in family/siblings	
Employment	
Sports Played	
Tick the activities you do	Piano

outside of school	<p>Other instrument</p> <p>In a band</p> <p>Babysitting</p> <p>Dance</p> <p>Drama</p> <p>Photography</p> <p>Public Speaking</p> <p>Charity/community work</p> <p>Guides/scouts</p> <p>Church activity</p> <p>Radio</p> <p>Art</p> <p>Other?</p>
Do you consider yourself	<p>Healthy?</p> <p>Happy?</p> <p>Successful?</p> <p>A leader?</p> <p>Bored?</p> <p>Challenged?</p> <p>Like everyone else?</p> <p>Different?</p>
What is most important to you?	Your appearance

(Rank them)	<p>Your friends</p> <p>Your family</p> <p>Your pets</p> <p>Your job</p> <p>Your health</p> <p>Your boyfriend</p>
Your hobbies	
Your favourite book	
Your favourite movie	
Your favourite music	
Your favourite food	
The person you admire most in popular culture	
The person who annoys you most in popular culture	

APPENDIX 7: Participant Information Letter for Interviews

University of Wollongong



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

Participants from Year 9 and Year 11.

Dear student,

This is an invitation for you to participate in the final activity in the research project conducted by Ms Denise Wood as a student of Wollongong University. The project is titled:

Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development.

During 2009 we met as focus groups to share thinking and ideas and in 2010 I need to meet some of you again as individuals or in pairs, for an interview that will draw together the ideas that emerged from the focus groups. This letter invites you to volunteer to participate in these interviews, which will be held in the school on June 30 and/or July 1. Each interview will take up to 60 minutes and will once again be recorded.

I do not expect everyone to volunteer but I am hoping that at least five of you are able to be involved again.

Please return the form below to Ms Logan by June 29, 2010 to indicate your preparedness to be interviewed (either alone or in a pair). I will then let you know the time that we will meet on the 2 designated days.

If you would like to talk to more about this activity for the research please email me on dwood@csu.edu.au or telephone me (0449252093).

Thank you for your interest in the research project.

DM Wood.

Denise Wood

School of Teacher Education

Allen House,

Charles Sturt University

Bathurst, 2795.

Faculty of Education University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone: (61 2) 4221 xxxx Facsimile: (61 2) 4221 xxxx
firstname.surname@uow.edu.au www.uow.edu.au



Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development. (Denise Wood)

Please return this slip

by June 29 2010.

Name: _____

Year: _____

I am happy to be involved in the interviews for this project on June 30 or July 1.

Please circle your preference below.

I would like to be interviewed alone.

I would like to be interviewed with _____.

Signed: _____

APPENDIX 8: Parent Information Letter for Interviews

University of Wollongong



LETTER OF INFORMATION TO PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Dear Parent/caregiver,

During 2009 your child was involved in a research project conducted by Denise Wood, a doctoral student at Wollongong University. The project was entitled: *Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the choices made by rural gifted girls in terms of identity and subsequent talent development*. I am writing to inform you of the final part of the data gathering for the research, that was delayed from 2009 until now in 2010 for a number of reasons.

The final activity will be conducted at Kelso High School on June 30 and/or July 1, 2010. I am inviting a minimum of five participants to meet with me for an interview, as indicated in the original documentation. For this activity, participants will either meet with me individually or in pairs for an interview of approximately 60 minutes in a location in the school, during school hours.

An invitation has been issued to all participants in the original focus groups. I ask that you encourage your child to be involved in this final activity to allow completion of the data gathering.

Once this is complete then I will be working on the final reporting of the research. This will finally be reported to you as parents, and the school as a site, in 2011.

I am very happy to answer any further questions about the research and can communicate with you by email (dwood@csu.edu.au) or by telephone (0449252093) at any time. Thank you for your interest in the research project.

DM Wood.

Denise Wood
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Allen House,
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst, 2795.

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APPENDIX 9: Question Guidelines for Focus Groups

Question Guidelines for Focus group meetings.

Group 1:

1. Introductions to process: taping of conversation – impact of recorder on conversation and reminders about not making extra noise.
2. Tell me your name and something about yourself that is interesting.
3. How did you feel about being invited to join this project?
 - a. (Possible probe if relevant) how did your parents respond?
4. What is popular culture?
 - a. (Possible probe if relevant)Where do you find it?
 - b. (Possible probe if relevant)Ideas and themes you notice within it.
 - c. (Possible probe if relevant)What worries you about it?
5. Timeline activity: write down all the things you would like to do in your life in a list.
6. Complete a timeline- place all the ideas you have on a timeline showing where you will do them in your life. Include any important/life changing events that have happened so far in your life. ‘
7. Description of using the journals over the course of the research.

Group 2:

1. Who are the influences in your life?
 - a. How do you make major decisions?
 - b. What ideas do you get about adulthood for women from the popular culture you interact with?
 - c. What messages do you get about achievement and success?
2. What does it mean to be smart? How does it feel?
 - a. Who is gifted? What does it mean?
3. What barriers to achieving your goals do you see?

Group 4:

1. Identify 1-2 characters you consider clever in movies/TV you are all familiar with.
 - a. What are the traits they show?
 - b. How is intelligence shown?
 - c. How are women portrayed as intelligent?
2. If you used TV/movie characters or actors as role models what sort of a person are you encouraged to be?
3. What does it take to develop your strengths?
 - a. What will stop you aiming to be the best in your field?

APPENDIX 10: Notes that Summarise Data for Participants in Interviews

Summary of Emergent Ideas from focus groups and discussion, reviewing data from August 2009 – May 2010.

Identity: ideas about identity that emerged from the conversations across both groups (or not, as indicated)

- These gifted girls are confident and can recognise themselves as different to other girls their age, even when not previously identified formally as gifted
- gifted girls, newly identified as gifted, demonstrate a sense of being different to others, a sense of purpose and a confidence in themselves to manage their school work and achieve their goals.
- These girls are well adjusted and with good self concepts.
- Physical appearance is a topic of conversation
- Drugs and alcohol- interested, curious (Year 10); disapproving (Year 7)
- Year 10 girls feel that shopping and clothes important to their lifestyles.

Aspiration: ideas about the future and goals that emerged across both groups (or not as indicated)

- they believe they will be able to do many things in their lives quite quickly
- See themselves as having multiple roles – career, family, education and travel
- they do have goals that include doing well at school
- by Year 10 girls have a clear sense of purpose
- All have aspirations and plans for their future.
 - Travel : overseas, local.
 - Good job or career: multiple options (Yr 7)
 - University or further study (year 10)
 - Finish school (year 10)
 - Own a car and drive
 - Play sport (Year 7)
- School provided the background and setting for their conversation and was where they experienced social activity
- Year 10 were sceptical about school but saw education as important and wanted to do well

- Girls talked about subversive activity in classrooms, but did not suggest they were not listened to or able to express themselves
- these girls did not feel they were necessarily challenged in school. They felt that it was their future opportunities (the unknown) that may be the challenge.
- expectations and traditions within their environment influenced their sense of self, and perhaps filtered the impact of popular culture. there may be challenges in terms of them taking on non-traditional roles and aiming to achieve their potential.

Relationships: ideas about relationships that emerged across both groups (or not as indicated) .

- Year 10 had close female friendships and supported each other
- Year 7 tended to be less cohesive as a group and were more concerned about the impact of peers on their choices
- Could identify different groups in their cohort, and felt they belonged to 'a' group, but happy to mix with other groups. Friendship groups did not limit other social connections
- These girls did not feel pressured to be like the others- were open about their ability
- Year 7 girls were aware of what they needed to do to be like others- of being one of the group. They also expressed a desire to be individual and not follow trends.
- Identified popular girls and what made them popular (appearance, behaviour, attitude) – felt that they would not choose to follow others (unless they wanted to) but there was some evidence of pressure to be like the crowd.
- Year 10 girls were friendly with males and felt the way they approached male friendships was one of the differences between them and other girls
- Relationships were important to all girls. Friends and family impacted on decisions and choices

Rurality

- Rurality was more evident in year 7 girls than year 10 girls – year 10 had travelled, shopped in Sydney, experienced many things beyond the local environment.
- Year 7 girls saw family as role models although they had contact through internet with others
- Neither age group wanted to stay in local area once finished school
- Because they live in a rural community, they have found friends who are the same and have stuck together over many years of school

Popular Culture

- Year 7 had some difficulty defining it; year 10 had studied it so felt they knew the answer
- All could list specific examples of where you might find it.
- Tools of popular culture included mobile phones and Internet access
- Year 7 used particular examples, identifying how it is different in different cultures
- Both groups accessed popular culture through magazines
- Popular culture is an integral part of the environment of these gifted girls
- Popular culture is an instructional tool for these girls – they get information about appearance, relationships and entertainment from it. It is an integral part of their lives
- They cannot necessarily see it as something to be analysed and looked at- it simply *is* in their environment, the tools are ever present.
- Popular culture does form a central part of their lives, and provides them with ideas about behaviour, expectation and achievement.
- These girls appear confident about themselves, talk about their futures, feel they are individuals who don't need to follow the crowd, but they feel pressured by popular culture to look a certain way.
- Popular culture forms the stories that girls tell, and is the basis of their conversations
- Names and titles of shows featured heavily in conversation
- Openly critiqued popular culture, noted how it was constructed to manipulate readers/viewers
- They critique the images in popular culture while they watch and follow the lives of celebrities. They know that these are constructions and real life is different.
- Their views on body image come from popular culture – they both follow it and defy it.
- However, their sense of body image is impacted on by what they see in popular culture
- They do not identify with characters as role models, although they talk about them frequently and use them as examples. They do not aspire to be like the celebrities – see their lives as made difficult by the creators of popular culture
- Year 7 –talked about the lives of celebrities but also has strong opinions about choice
- There is a desire to meet someone famous (year 7).
- the girls see that the images presented contradict the ideas of feminism – stressing that women need to be feminine and aim to get a man

- they also see images that present clever women as the fixer- but these are the 'assistants' - not the main character.
- they did not find the portrayal of intelligent women positive- which discourages them from claiming the identity.
- reinterpret the visual texts in the context of their lives– concern that gifted is presented as not acceptable.
- It does not present a view of academic intelligence, rather practical intelligence and problem solving.
- Mixed messages mean some identity confusion – choosing which role to play.
- They see successful women revert to feminine behaviours to get a man- a confusing message to address when in a rural context they do not experience role models of gifted women achieving in non-traditional roles.

The questions I want to answer with this research:

In what ways does popular culture support or disrupt the talent development of gifted adolescent rural girls?

4. *How do rural gifted girls respond to the concepts presented to them in popular culture?*
5. *How does what they say about themselves as 'gifted' reflect what they see in popular culture?*
6. *How does their response to popular culture change at significant points in their lives?*

APPENDIX 11: Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews

Give the girls the questions – what answers do they have to them?

1. Clarification of the emerging ideas from the focus groups – the key ideas (put them on pieces of paper to stimulate discussion at the start of the interview)
2. A form of checking – is what I have heard re the stories what they also see/hear? So need the stories from the data.,
3. Finding out what individuals feel about popular culture- does it influence them in their choices or plans? How does it make them feel about being intelligent?

Interview Plan.

90 minutes.

1-3 girls from original groups.

1. Since being involved in the research groups last year, do you think you see yourself differently, or approach school and life differently?
 - a. does identification change identity?
2. Reading through the summaries of the ideas, what are your thoughts and responses to my interpretations of what was said in the focus groups?
 - a. Are there some that surprise you?
 - b. Are there some that you feel are not correct?
 - c. Are these the sorts of ideas that you feel were part of our discussions?
3. Tell me about your responses to the headings I have placed the ideas under: identity, aspiration, relationships, rurality, popular culture.
 - a. Are these words that apply to your lives?
 - b. How can you describe your life in these terms?
4. In what ways do you think that popular culture impacts on your aspirations, or your sense of self?
 - a. Is it a positive influence for academic achievement?
 - b. In what ways does it present girls?
 - c. How does it reflect feminism for you?
5. Is there anything else you would like to say about the issue of popular culture and the messages it gives girls about themselves?

APPENDIX 12: Letter for Returning Journal

University of Wollongong



Dear Year 7 participant,

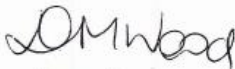
Thank you for your participation in the first stage of my research project:
Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the development of rural gifted girls' identity and subsequent talent development.

It has been a pleasure to meet you and work with you over the time. Your contributions to the focus groups have given me a large amount of data to work with.

Please return your journal to the school office by Friday 18 September, 2009. Do not worry if you have not filled it in consistently over the period – whatever is in there will be useful! I will keep any items you have included in them safe until I return them to you later in the year. There is a box in the office specifically for the journals and a thank you gift for you to collect when you return it.

The next stage of the research will involve interviews, either individually or in pairs as explained in the original permission letter. At the end of October I will contact the school for volunteers to be interviewed. I plan to interview at least 3-4 of you from each focus group.

Once again, thank you for your help and I look forward to the interviews in November.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "DM Wood".

Regards
Denise Wood



Dear Year 10 participant,

Thank you for your participation in the first stage of my research project: ***Beauty or Brains? The impact of popular culture on the development of rural gifted girls' identity and subsequent talent development.***

It has been a pleasure to meet you and work with you over the time. Your contributions to the focus groups have given me a large amount of data to work with.

Please return your journal to the school office by Friday 18 September, 2009. Do not worry if you have not filled it in consistently over the period – whatever is in there will be useful! I will keep any items you have included in them safe until I return them to you later in the year. There is a box in the office specifically for the journals and a thank you gift for you to collect when you return it .

The next stage of the research will involve interviews, either individually or in pairs as explained in the original permission letter. At the end of October I will contact the school for volunteers to be interviewed. I plan to interview at least 3-4 of you from each focus group.

Once again, thank you for your help and I look forward to the interviews in November.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "DM Wood".

Regards
Denise Wood

APPENDIX 13: Summaries of Year 7/8 Personal Profile completed in July 2009

Table 1: Overall summary of Profile Responses		
<i>Number</i>	Total: 17	
<i>Year at School</i>	Year 7 2009 year 8 2010	
<i>Age</i>	Mean age 12.67 years (July 2009)	
<i>Family Structure</i>	Nuclear 10 Single parent (mother) 2	
<i>Position in family</i>	Oldest 5 Youngest 7	Only child 0 Only girl 2
<i>Has a paid job</i>	Yes 2 No 10	
<i>Sport Played</i>	Dancing 3 Netball 3 Soccer 3 Swim 1	Tennis 2 Hockey 1 None 5
<i>Activities outside school</i>	Piano 2 Other instrument 4 Band 2	Public speaking 3 Charity/community work 3 Guides/scouts

	Babysitting 2 Dance 4 Drama Photography 1	Church activity 5 Radio Art 7 Other 6	
<i>Favourite Music</i>	Top charts Pink 80’s Meatloaf Tayor Swift 2 Katy Perry	Random music Corrs Jessica Mauiboy Rap, hip hop Veronicas Pop/rock	Indi U2 Paramore Missy Higgins Evanescence Rhianna
<i>Favourite Book</i>	Don’t read Harry Potter Candy Sugar Geronimo Stilton Skull Duggery series	Highwayman Series Ruby Rousemount Twilight W.I.T.C.H. Dear Dumb Diary	Shakespeare Scripts The Green Wind A Series of Unfortunate Events Jane Blond
<i>Favourite Movie</i>	Harry Potter Twilight	Horror Comedy	Suddenly 30 Overboard

	Hannah Montana Wallie Bolt	Romance Spirited Away Cam Rock	Mean Girls Rocky Series Nightmare before Christmas
<i>Hobbies</i>			
<i>Favourite food</i>			

Table 2: Responses to what is valued by Year 7/8 girls (July 2009)								
Profile Question 11								
What is most important to you?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Appearance	*		*****	*	*****	*	
9/12 put as 2	Friends	**	*****	**				
9/12 put as 1	Family	*****	*	**		*		
	Pets	*	***	**	*****	*	*	

	Job			**	*		**	****
	Health	*		***	****	***	**	
	Boyfriend		*		*	**	***	***

Profile Question 12								
Do you consider yourself		Yes						
	Healthy	*****	8/12					
11/12 consider themselves happy	Happy	*****	11/12					
	Successful	*****	10/12					
	A leader	**	2/12					
	Bored	*****	8/12					
	Challenged	*	1/12					
	Like everyone else	*	1/12					
11/12 consider themselves different	Different	*****	11/12					

APPENDIX 14: Names mentioned across conversations throughout research (both Year 10/11 and Year 7/8)

Celebrity names	Shows/Movies:	Magazines	Other Items
Lindsey Lohan	Neighbours	Girlfriend	Ravens (shoes)
Brittney Speares	Super Sweet Sixteen	Dolly	Barbie
Miley Cyrus	Miss Congeniality	Total; Girl	Bratts Dolls
Zoe Genersch	That's so Raven	Famous	Manga
Brooke Patterson	Home and Away	New Weekly	Garfield
Sarah Jessica Parker	Bondi Vet	OK	Ginger Meggs
Britney Spears	Deal or no deal	Kaleidoscope	
Justin Timberlake	Friends	Football Magazines	
Pussycat Dolls	Mean Girls (plastics is used a number of times – term comes from this movie)	Riding Magazines	
Pink		Frankie	
Lady Godiva	Hannah Montana	Cosmopolitan	
Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen	Futurama	Cleo	Media Names not from Entertainment
Jennifer Hudson	Grey's Anatomy	Madison	Julia Gillard
Nicole Ritchie	OC	Zoo	Andrew Johns

Paris Hilton	NCIS	Harpers Bazaar	Matthew Johns
Elle MacPherson	Bones	Vogue	Mel
Keira Knightley	Simpsons	Better Homes and Gardens	
Audrey Hepburn	Masterchef	'mum's magazines'	
Marilyn Monroe	New Tricks		
Kate Moss	MASH		
Johnny Depp	The Virgin suicides		
Jessica Alba	Texas Chainsaw Massacre		
MIscha Barton	Wolf Creek		
Taylor Swift	Rocky Horror Picture Show		
Keisha	Australia's Got Talent		
Lady Gaga	Twilight Series		
Lindsay Lohan	Finding Nemo		
Spice Girls	Big Bang Theory		
Miley Cyrus	Legally Blonde		
Justin Bieber	Rove		
Zac Efron	Dead Poets' Society		
Vanessa Hudgens	Sex in the City		
Jessica Mauboy	Australian Idol		

Lilli Allen	Secret Life of an American Teenager		
Tim Minchin	Gossip Girl		
Ministry of Sound	Malcolm in the Middle		
M&M	Desperate Housewives		
Short Stack	Ugly Betty		
Kirsten Dunst	The Bachelor		
Angela Jolie	Bachelorette		
Brad Pitt	The Devil Wears Prada		
Mr Bean	Painted Babies		
Jennifer Hudson	Packed to the Rafters		
Michael Jackson	Dexter		
Jonas Brothers,	Nightmare at Christmas		
Jessie McCartney,	Rage		
Zac Effron,	Everybody Loves Raymond		
Jamie Lynn Speares	Harry Potter		
Beatles	Avatar		
Rolling Stones	Jaws		
Janis Joplin			
Joni Mitchell			

Joan Baez			
Dylan Moran			
Oprah Winfrey			
Robert Pattison			
Kylie Minogue			
Ellen DeGeneres			
Dolly Parton			
Coco Chanel			

APPENDIX 15: Summaries of Year 10/11 Personal Profile Completed in July 2009

Table 1: Overall summary of Profile Responses			
Number	Total: 18		
Year at School	2009 Year 10 2010 Year 11		
Age	Average age: 15.7 years (July 2009) Minimum age: 15 Years 2 months Maximum age: 16 years 2 months		
Family Structure	Nuclear 12 Nuclear step family 2 Single parent 2 Shared living (week about) 2		
Position in family	Eldest 7 Middle 3 Youngest 6	Only child 2 Only girl 5 Family of girls 6	
Has a paid job	Yes 12 No 6		
Sport Played	None 3 Touch football 2 Kickboxing 2 Netball 5 Gym 4	Soccer 2 Horse riding Fencing Archery Swimming	Squash *Tennis *Basketball *Athletics *Cricket

	*Hockey 2	Jogging/running Karate	<i>Sports indicated *all listed by one person</i>
<i>Activities outside school</i>	Instrument 5 Band 3 Babysit 9 Piano 2 Public Speaking 2 Charity 3 Church 3 Guides	Internet Reading Dance Photography 3 Art 4 Radio Drama Dance	
<i>Favourite Music</i>	Whatever sounds good Rock Indie/Alternate 2 All music 6 Pop 2 Triple J music Paramore 2 My parents' music	Red Hot Chilli Peppers David Bowie Radiohead The Monkees Cold Chisel Kinks Jack Johnson Lady Gaga	The Shins The Eels Elliott Smith Bon Iver Imogen Heap Akon Escape the Fate My Chemical Romance

		Chris Brown Regina Spektor	Underoath Sandithorn
<i>Favourite Book</i>	The Power of One (2) The Day of the Triffids Twilight Series 4 Many different authors/titles 2 Series by Diana Gabaldon Sooki Stackhouse series	Life According to Garp Lori Hadnland books Janet Evanovich The Vampirates Lesley Pierce Georgia Nicholson Series Losing It	John Irving Cupid Painted Blind Harry Potter Murder Most Fab The Perks of Being a Wallflower River God, Wilbur Smith
<i>Favourite Movie</i>	Many 2 The Notebook 2 Forrest Gump 2 Comedy movies 2 Violence Romance Disney films Johnny Depp movies	10 Things I Hate About You The Pirates of the Caribbean Juno The Illusionist Donne Park Mulan Clueless Titanic Neverending Story	Twilight St Trinians Breakfast at Tiffanys Being Human Cry Baby Disturbia Amelle Pans Labyrinth Anchorman

<i>Hobbies</i>	Reading 9 Music: play, listen 9 Being with People 6 Movies 6 TV 6 Facebook 3	Computer 2 Talking 2 iPod listening 2 Writing 2 Photography 2 Sewing and Crafts 2 Karate Beach Baking	Vintage music collecting Reworking vintage clothes Shopping Interior Design Drawing Boyfriend
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Table 2: Responses to what is valued by Year 10/11 girls (July 2009)								
Profile Question 11								
What is most important to you?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Appearance			****	*****	*****	***	*
	Friends	*****	*****		**	*		
12/18 place highest value on	Family	*****	***	*			**	

family								
	Pets	*		*****	*****	****	*	*
	Job		*		**	*****	*****	***
	Health	*	****	*****	***	**	*	
	Boyfriend	**	*		**	*	****	*****
Profile Question 12								
Do you consider yourself		Yes	sometimes	no	Don't know	Will be		
	Healthy	*****		***			12/18 healthy	
	Happy	*****	*		*		16/18 happy	
	Successful		***		*	*	0/18 successful	
	A leader	****	*****				4/18 leader	
	Bored	****		*****			4/18 bored	
	Challenged	*****	***	**			6/18 challenged	
	Like everyone else	**	*	***			2/10 like everyone else	
	Different	*****	**				12/18 different	

APPENDIX 16: Year 10/11 Participant Visual Definition of Popular Culture

