

**“WE ARE NOT JUST PAINTING OUR TOENAILS AND HAVING
PILLOW FIGHTS”: ADOLESCENT GIRLS QUESTIONING
GENDER AND POWER WITHIN A SECONDARY SCHOOL
SETTING**

by

STEPHANIE K. HIGGINSON

B.A., UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH, 1998
B. Ed., UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, 2001

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Abstract

In today's modern world, girls are represented in confusing and contradicting ways. Media portrays girls as dealing with epidemic levels of depression and self mutilation while at the same time point out that girls are participating in alarming levels of violence and competition. Layered within these media images is the popular culture driven commodification of all things pink and powerful which gives the public perception that girls ought and do feel confident in their bodies. All of these confusing messages leave teen girls with very little room to negotiate their own gendered identity as they make their way through secondary schooling. This research focuses on an on-going school-based gender awareness program entitled Girls' Nite. Girls' Nite is designed to encourage girls to make sense of and redefine the confusing and often competing discursive messages presented to and about girls within the secondary school setting.

I conducted a month long study in the urban Canadian secondary school in which this program is running. During my time at Westside High I conducted interviews, observed classes and supervised the Girls' Nite sleepover. I also assisted some of the participants to make educational documentary films about their experiences with the Girls' Nite program. These films accompany the thesis and readers are asked to view them as part of the process of reading this thesis. This research is also informed by my 4 years spent as a staff member at this school and by my position as a staff advisor to the Girls' Nite program during those years.

My findings suggest that Girls' Nite is successful in its attempts to allow young women the space to make sense of and re-envision what it means to be a young women amongst confusing and competing discourses about girlhood. Through their involvement in Girls' Nite, the young women were better able to understand how they are positioned

within the discourses of gender and power and, in some cases, race, ethnicity and sexuality. As a result, the research participants re-envisioned the way they defined and enacted power and resistance. Finally, they challenged others in position of power within the school to question expectations of femininity and the impact that those expectations had on the female students of their school.

By placing this research at the intersection of girl studies and education, I draw attention to the complex ways that girls are constructed within the school setting and examine the ways that girls can construct their own meaning about girlhood within this school setting. Through examining the complexity involved in the way young women worked to produce and promote change amongst themselves and others within their school, I hope to show that girls are not passively shaped by active others; rather they can and will actively re-envision the discourses through which they are shaped. Through the inclusion of a discussion on where boys fit into this program, I hope to offer the possibility that under the right circumstances, girls and schools can be used as sites for social change in order to combat the current backlash against girls' newfound social visibility.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Preface: Photo Exhibit	vi
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Dedication	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INCITEMENT TO RESEARCH: GIRLHOOD, GENDER AND SCHOOLING.....	1
Representation, Voice and Power: Locating Myself Within This Research	4
The Research Site	6
Incitement to Research	13
The Girls' Nite Program.....	17
The History of Girls' Nite	17
The Night of Girls' Nite: Reimagining Girlhood	22
Counternarratives: Taking back their identity.....	30
What Does Not Happen in this Research.....	32
What Comes Next? Structure of Thesis.....	33
CHAPTER 2: DISCUSSIONS OF METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ISSUES OF VOICE AND REPRESENTATION	34
Theoretical Framework.....	34
Poststructuralist Feminist Research.....	34
Discourse, Identity, Power, Agency and Resistance: Definitions and Complications	35
Research Methodology.....	42
Setting the Research Stage: Gaps in Methodology.....	42
Generating Data, Negotiating a Place: Returning to Westside High	48
“If you are not coming back next year, then what are you doing here?” The Experience of Being an Insider and an Outsider.....	50
Methodological Procedures	53
The Girls' Nite Girls	53
The Interviews	55
The Films: “We filled the school server with feminist film footage!!”....	59
Data Analysis: “Co-constructions at the hyphen”.....	62
Narrative as a Framework for Writing.....	67

CHAPTER 3: "I DIDN'T FEEL POWERFUL, BUT NOW I FEEL POWERFUL": RE-ENVISIONING THE MATRIX	70
Girlpower Does not Always Mean Girls Have Power	71
"Pillow Fighting Pornfest": Recognizing the Limits and Expectations of Gender.....	74
Staff Resistance: Pet Projects and School Bullies.....	76
"What about a boys' night?": "Equality" Unveiled	80
Counter Resistance: "What are they so scared of?"	85
Doing Gender Differently: Female students recognizing performative gender roles	87
Doing Gender Differently: Female students challenging performative gender roles as a way to disrupt, transform and claim power within the walls of Westside High.....	94
I spy sexism: Reversing the gaze	96
"They have baggage too": Young Men's Discussion Group	100
"They look at me differently now": Addressing staff expectations of femininity	105
Addressing public displays of sexism	106
Addressing not so public displays of sexism	108
Conclusion	111
CHAPTER FOUR: CRITIQUING THE PROGRAM: SCHOOL AS A SITE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?	114
Girls' Nite, Girl Power: The essentializing risk of a program called Girls' Nite...115	
Where is the colour?: How does Girls' Nite address the intersections of race and gender?	126
"They feel powerful when they are mean": A questionable enactment of power.....	130
"It made me feel less crazy": Schools as sites for social change	135
CHAPTER FIVE: "I AM HELPING TO BUILD SOMETHING": IDENTITY, POWER AND SCHOOLING	138
Power and Identity: The ability to negotiate the discursive self	139
What about the boys? Gender, power, identity and schooling	143
More questions, fewer answers: Areas of future research	147
REFERENCES	152

Preface: Photo Exhibit



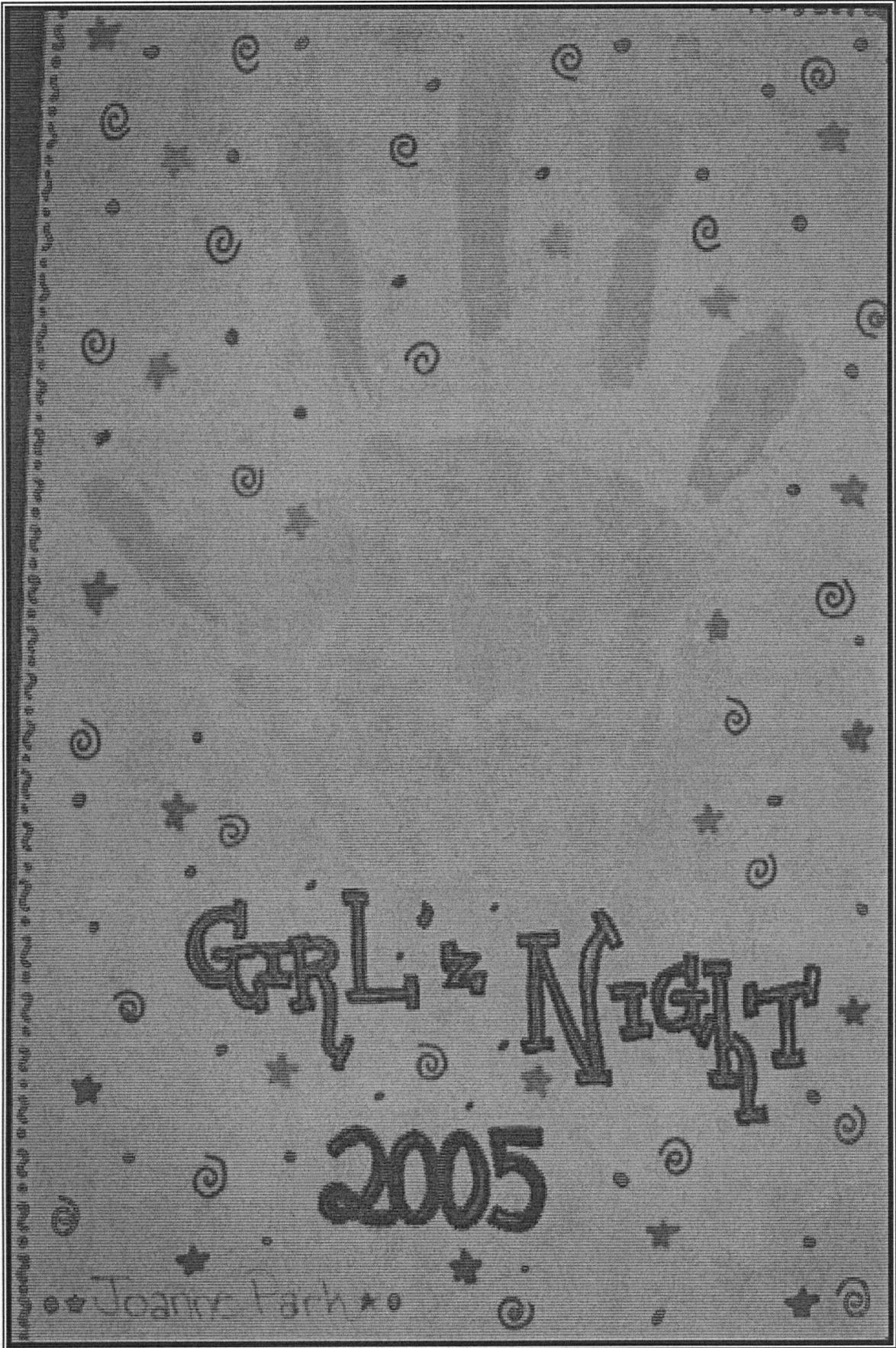
What is

Girls Nite

all about?

Many people ask us what girls nite is, and what we do. Well, that's hard to explain in just one sentence. So here are a bunch of responses from a number of girls: "It's about bonding with other girls, meeting people + learning new things about yourself" Rebecca + Natalie. Sarah says it's "learning about how to make positive change in your community." Jessica says it's "all about community and fun." Melissa felt it was difficult to sum up in a sentence... too many good things to say! Alice "time for girls to party together." Orpah says "it's bonding time but not the cheesy kind." Kim: "It's all the girls coming together and taking the walls down." Tiana "It's about vaginas; Vaginas make the world go around." Alison "It's a nite to talk, laugh, cry, smile, hug and build community." Steph says "It's about building community amongst women, why is that such a hard thing to do?" Hannah "coming together." Imogen "staying up all night."





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I cannot write any further without giving a big HUGE thank-you to the girls who gave me their time, their words and their images to make this research possible. I have been immersed in your words and images for the past 12 months. Your strength and courage inspired me everyday to continue with this work. I want to thank Jill and Alison who gave me so much of their time, whether it was helping me figure out how to make movies, giving me classroom space or just listening as I grappled with ideas. Without you, this final document would not be possible.

I must also acknowledge my family. Thanks to my mom who always seemed to just know. She seemed to know when I needed someone to call me and give me that little bit of encouragement as I struggled to remember why I embarked on this process. She seemed to just know when I was at risk of scrapping the mould off the bread crusts and magically money for groceries would appear in my bank account. It is because of your unfaltering support and encouragement that I am who I am. I must also acknowledge my

dad, my poor dad, who despite my age and his retirement, always said yes when I needed financial “aid” for new glasses or new orthotics. Thanks to my sister Kelly for listening and encouraging me, despite my constant state of poverty. My extended family also requires acknowledgement. I thank my step-dad Len, for his constant editing and captivating conversations about power, privilege and teenage girls. I also thank my step-mom for feeding me Sunday dinners throughout this process, even when it took 10 months longer than I thought.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of

Susan Elizabeth Carthy
1947-2006

Her capacity to love was unwavering and inspiring.
If more of us could love the way she did there would not be a need for social justice.

You are missed daily

Chapter One

INCITEMENT TO RESEARCH: GIRLHOOD, GENDER AND SCHOOLING

[FN April 18, 2005] Arriving late, I rushed into the auditorium for the school wide talent contest being dubbed “Westside Idol.” The whole school was in the auditorium to witness various displays of musical talent from their fellow students. I had promised to watch two of my former students as they participated in the event by singing a duet. I was nervous that I had missed their performance. As I entered the auditorium, I could hear screams and cat calls coming from female voices. While the voice wasn’t the only one I could hear in the crowd, it was the words that were being vaulted toward the stage that caught my attention. “You suck”, “Get off the stage”, “Whoever told you that you could sing?!!”. I cringed as these words cut through the crowd, remembering what a mean and nasty place high school can be. As I walked down the aisle way in the jam packed auditorium to see who was behaving in this hurtful way my mouth hit the floor when I saw who it was. Melody, one of the girls I was here to work with, who has spent the last four years of her secondary school devoted to a program to build community amongst the young women in the school, was yelling, whistling, hollering these words that were cutting across the auditorium. Other students around her sat, almost embarrassed, younger students behind sat staring at her, not what was happening on stage, but at her, with looks of fear, of anger, of disbelief.

Later as we were all walking to a café for lunch I asked Melody what the display was all about. She looked at me with a confused look on my face and said, “Oh come on Stephanie, you know I don’t actually mean any of that, it is just for fun.”

“But why would you do that Melody? You have to explain more, I don’t understand. What was fun about what you were doing in there?” I asked.

Melody looked at me, “Because I can” she responded. And with that, she dug into her purse to find a cigarette. Izzy pulled on me to ask me a question, I made a mental note to myself to revisit this situation with Melody another time, when there weren’t so many people around.

This research focuses on an on-going gender awareness program in an urban Canadian secondary school. At the time of data collection, Girls’ Nite was in its third year. The program began after numerous female students at the school began to disclose to me, then a teacher at Westside High, and another female staff member their stories of depression and medication to treat this depression. Initially, Girls’ Nite was developed to create community amongst the young women in the school as a method to address the

increasing number of female students suffering from various levels and forms of depression. However, soon after its establishment, the female students at Westside High took hold of the program and shaped it into something that they saw themselves reflected in and wanting to participate in. Over the past three years, the program has grown from running a one-night sleepover, once a year, to events and discussions that run throughout the year in conjunction with the sleepover event. The sleepover event itself has also evolved from specifically addressing depression to include issues that the girls both need help dealing with and gain strength from exposure to. The Girls' Nite program aims to foster a space for communication between the female students within the school community in order to experience moments of rupture within the "matrix of domination" (Hill Collins, 2000) that monitors gender roles within a traditional secondary school setting. These moments of rupture offer opportunities for each girl to investigate and question the way assumptions of stable gender roles influence and impact their experience with schooling.

Specifically, this research focuses on eight young women who have been involved with Girls' Nite for various periods of time throughout their secondary school years. Three of the young women, Melody, Rosa and Izzy, have been involved in the program from the beginning and helped plan the first Girls' Nite. Four other young women, Marcia, Amber, Sarah and Andrea, have been involved in the program since its second year. The eighth young woman, Rachel, only became involved in the program the year prior to this research, her last year of secondary school. Together, these young women make up a group of girls known in the school as "The Girls' Nite Girls." They are extremely dedicated to the goals and programming of Girls' Nite. The three that have

been involved since the first Girls' Nite have planned each and every Girls' Nite event from the beginning, the other girls have joined the program at various points, for various reasons and remained fiercely dedicated since their first meeting.

This research examines the influence that Girls' Nite has had on the identity¹ formation of the young women throughout their involvement with the program. In order to focus this research, the main research question investigated is:

- How do the girls involved in Girls' Nite perceive their involvement in Girls' Nite has influenced how they negotiate and experience gendered identity formation during secondary school?

Other questions investigated are:

- How do the girls involved in Girls' Nite view/define/conceptualize gendered identity formation?
- How do the girls in Girls' Nite feel about current discourses surrounding young women?
- How has involvement with Girls' Nite created a space for girls to acknowledge and negotiate gendered subjectivity during secondary school?

Entangled within this investigation of identity formation is the way power influenced the young women and how each of the young women came to negotiate and use the power that they acquired and developed through their involvement with the Girls' Nite program. Amongst this analysis of how the young women negotiated and used their power will be an exploration of how the use of power by the young women in the school unnerved and unseated the traditional holders of power within the school walls. Foucault (1978) states

¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will utilize Davidson's (1996) definition of identity as "presentation of self in a matrix of social relationships – a pattern of social assertion that significant others recognize and come to expect" (p. 2). Using this idea of identity within my thesis accounts for a girl's process of presenting her way into existence through involvement in Girls' Nite, while at the same time subjecting herself to the constitutive force and regulative norms of the very issues she is organizing around, making allowances for how one might invest in competing discourses simultaneously (Gonick 2003, p.10).

that power is “not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual’s consolidated and homogenous domination over others...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization” (p. 98). The ways that power relations between the “Girls’ Nite Girls” and traditional holders of power in the school unfolded exemplifies Foucault’s notion of power as a net-like organization. This discussion on power will attempt to weave through the complicated web in order to demonstrate the complex way this power played itself out within the walls of Westside High.

Representation, Voice and Power: Locating Myself within This Research

Where am I located in relation to girlhood and the context of this research? I am a white, English speaking woman from an upper-class background. I have a professional degree and I am currently involved in graduate education with a focus on girl studies. Although I struggle financially everyday to put myself through school on a full-time basis, I recognise that this financial struggle stems from my privileged background. I never forget that I walk with much privilege. Whiteness permeates the work that I do, in ways I am likely unaware; at the very least I am able to acknowledge its impact even if my vision is obscured. As a feminist, anti-oppressive teacher with a vision towards creating a classroom space where all students can exchange knowledge and build community across generations and diverse cultures, I am one of the founding teachers of the “Girls’ Nite” program at Westside High. Therefore, my connection to this research is both academic *and* personal. I have watched this program develop from the beginning and nurtured its existence for the past three years from my geographic (dis)location on the opposite side of the country. My view and my role in this research is not objective; I know these young women; I have held their hands through traumas and encouraged them

through opportunities. My view is partial and situated (Haraway, 1988), based in and on my experience with these young women, as a teacher, a confidant, a “supervisor” in the secondary school they set out to transform. My view is also partial and situated (Haraway, 1988) by my privilege and in my bias (Harding, 1987; Lather, 1991). My positionality was one of my biggest challenges in writing this piece because as a teacher, a friend and a researcher, my positionality is tightly wrapped up in the power matrix spoken about earlier. It is not sufficient just to state my location and move on from there. Throughout the writing process, I had to constantly remind myself of this position and constantly question what influence this position has on what appears on these pages (Haraway, 1991).

This process was particularly difficult in my interaction with Melody and the way that she chose to use her position and power offered to her through her involvement in Girls’ Nite. Continually questioning my unease and displeasure with her actions, her language and even her presence proved to be one of the biggest challenges in this writing. However, it was also the most fruitful and beneficial challenge. Melody’s use of power and her statements such as, “because I can” challenged the vision I had for Girls’ Nite from the outset, one of a strong, supportive community that would allow the young women to band together in support of an adolescent feminist movement. Instead, Melody’s use of power pried open numerous discussions involving multiple players concerned or not concerned with Girls’ Nite. These multiple discussions forced us to explore our own expectations and understanding of power. They also required us to shake our conventional and normalising expectations of “girlhood” and “power” and

question our own complicity in creating the “matrix of domination” that Girls’ Nite was aiming to transform.

Simply stating my multiple locations within this research and acknowledging that complexity in my position does not absolve me of the problematic implications that come with this positioning. It is important to make transparent the lenses through which I interpret the girls’ stories and the experience of Girls’ Nite. I attempted to be as critical and reflexive as I felt possible, continually being aware of the aspects of “self” that are the most significant filters through which one perceives the world, and more importantly, the topic being studied (Behar, 1996). My involvement in Girls’ Nite, through my experience as a staff member and a staff advisor cannot be ignored. However, instead of being detrimental to the study or creating a risky unethical personal link to the project, I believe my critical self-reflection validates what is already known: that any scholarly project is inherently an expression of elements of its researcher’s life. Acknowledging my place within this research space produces a study that (again) does not seek scientific truth or universality, but rather honours “situated knowledge” and “particular and specific embodiment” (Haraway, 1988), and contests the idea that research can ever be disinterested or neutral (Lather, 1994).

The Research Site and The Research Program

The School

Westside High is a small public secondary school located in one of Canada’s largest urban centres. Until three years ago, Westside was located in an economically and socially diverse area of the city. However, due to school board politics and shifting Ministry of Education policies, the entire school was physically moved to the current

location in an affluent area of the city. Westside High carries special status as an “alternative school” and therefore the school population is pulled from all over the city. As a result, the student population is more economically and ethnically diverse than the neighbourhood in which it is located. Since “the move” this diversity is shifting, and slowly the school population is becoming more homogenous and representative of the neighbourhood. This means the school population is becoming mainly populated by middle-upper class white students. When the move first happened and the new students poured into the school, the more established Westside High students voiced concern over the homogenisation they saw occurring in the hallways of the school. However, after three full years in their new location, those students who voiced dissent have graduated



and the politics of the move has begun to die a quiet death. It cannot be left unsaid that many of those dissenting voices also transferred out of Westside High due to their feelings of unease with the transition in the school demographics and the impact they

felt it was having on the school programming.

Westside High shares a building with two other schools. One large school building, built at the turn of the century has been carved up into three almost neat sections in which the student populations do not interact unless outside the school building. There is an unspoken competition that exists among the schools, but for the

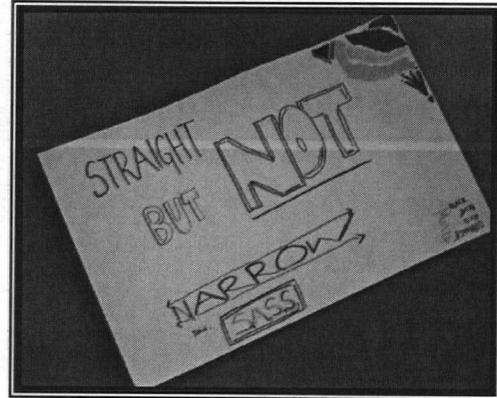
most part they are able to function independently of each other. Because Westside was relocated three years ago, the inside of the building has been recently renovated to allow Westside to function independently of the other schools. There is a new library (but not new contents), lockers, gymnasium and recently painted walls. The stairwells are adorned with murals from various art classes, a number of which resemble the graffiti art genre that has become so popular with well-off urban adolescents.

Also within the walls of the school exists a “peace room”. The peace room is not a classroom, although it occasionally gets used for various classroom activities. The peace room is meant to be a room where students can go to meditate, pray or gather to discuss various socially just causes. Although the intention of the peace room is commendable, in today’s “safe schools” craze, the room is locked almost 90% of the school year and only opened when staff supervision is available. The staff attempted to organize a rotating supervision schedule to ensure the room could be left open, however, as teacher workload increased, this quickly fell to the wayside. The fact that Westside was able to have this space in the school not allocated as classroom space speaks to the importance of social justice within the school mandate. As a result in shift of government, the space allocated in each school on a per student basis had changed significantly since Westside High opened its doors in its original location. When the move was announced, the allocation of a Peace Room did not meet the new Ministry of Education standards of student/square foot space allocation. So, while the original intended use of the Peace Room has been altered significantly, its presence serves to remind students, staff and school visitors of the original founding values of Westside High.

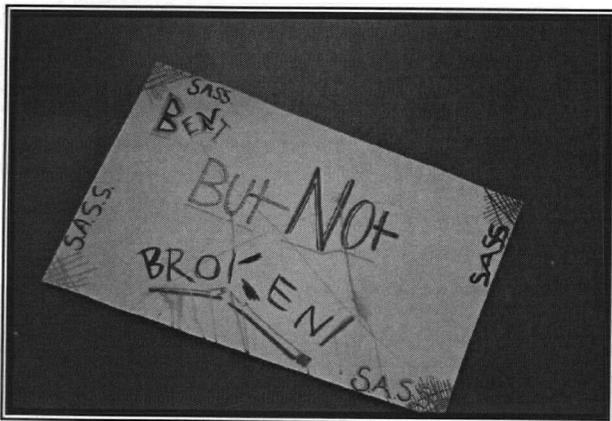
Westside High is a comparatively new school within the district school board. In June 2005, Westside High graduated its tenth graduating class. It was in this class that the entire cohort of Girls' Nite girls crossed the stage to collect their high school diplomas. The school was originally founded under a left provincial government. The school vision was to create a cross-curricular school, focussing learning on student interests in order to encourage independence in learning, critical and innovative thinking with social justice and peace at the heart of all school activities and lessons. The provincial government changed to an ultra-conservative government that re-wrote the provincial Education Act. In a move to create more "accountability" in learning across the province a provincially standardised curriculum, including the introduction of numerous provincial exams, quickly altered the way that Westside High was able to work with its intended mandate.

While curriculum and instructional practises have shifted, an undercurrent of social justice can be felt throughout the school, led by a dedicated principal and a handful of dedicated staff. This is noticeable in the types of extra-curricular activities available at the school. There is an award winning anti-homophobia student group called, "S.A.S.S." which stands for "Students Against Sexual Stereotyping". S.A.S.S. is also responsible for hosting an annual conference called Converge in order to bring together queer activists and artists with the students to address issues of sexuality and blurring sexual boundaries. There is the "Ghana Group". This is a group of 10-15 students that raise money and travel to Ghana every two years in order to better understand the history of slavery and racism. Although it may sound as though this trip is laced with elements of "spectatorship", the program was initiated by a teacher in response to the numerous

school trips that are run to western European locals in an effort to bring awareness and opportunity for change and challenge student notions of history and privilege. “Girls’ Nite” will be discussed further in this chapter, however the program runs all year long to raise awareness surrounding issues of gender inequity. Amongst all of these programs there are also more traditional school activities, such as the school sports teams and various school traditional school clubs, such as the “Environmental Alliance”, the “Chess Club” and the “Robotics Team”.



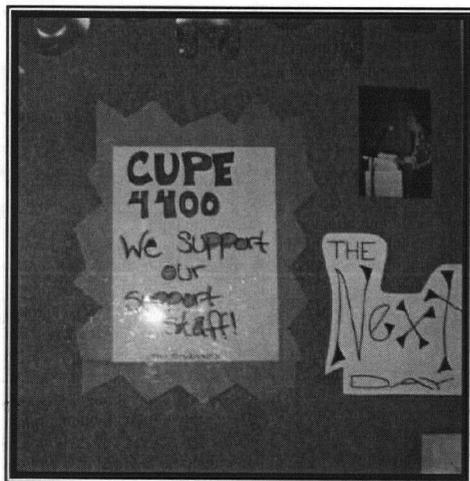
The impact of these social justice oriented programs cannot be ignored when talking about the school community at Westside High. The S.A.S.S. group regularly plasters the school walls with posters such as the ones seen here in photos of the school walls taken during my visit. In 2002 they



organized the first district-wide school board float to appear in the cities annual Pride Parade. A big yellow school bus adorned with rainbow flags and stickers, followed by students and board staff holding signs saying, “Teachers Can Create Safe Classrooms”

and “One More Safe Queer Student” and “Equity + Diversity” snaked its way along the parade route with all the other Pride Parade excitement. S.A.S.S. continued to organize the school board’s Pride Parade float until 2005 when they refused to advertise equity for the school board after the board pulled funding for the annual Pride Prom.

The student council has always been dominated by left leaning students, some liberal, but mostly progressive thinkers, using their positions to challenge, question and



bring awareness to notions of privilege and ideas of equity both in the school and in the school board. While at Westside High collecting data, the school support staff were undergoing labour negotiations with the school board. In solidarity, the Student Council placed a sign in the middle of their

announcement board, located outside the school cafeteria affirming their support for the union. The student population has numerous students who are “out” with their non-compliance to heterosexuality as well as two students who are transitioning M-F. While the school is becoming more conservative, there is still a special feeling in the hallways of Westside High, one where students are encouraged and allowed to question norms and confining binaries, where creativity and innovation are rewarded over compliance and submission to standards. It is in this environment of inquiry that the Girls’ Nite girls were able to carve out a space for questioning the confines of gender domination and

open up discussion throughout the school regarding the hidden culture of sexism that had sedimented² itself into the space of Westside High.

As already mentioned, the student population of Westside High is ethnically and economically diverse, although that is slowly changing. The students at Westside are predominantly white, with students of colour comprising about half of the school population. This percentage of White students is higher than the board-wide average. This can be accounted for with two explanations. The first is the location of Westside High, in a predominantly middle-upper class area of the city. The second is the nature of Westside High's student intake. As already stated, Westside accepts students from across the school board. The fact that students and parents must seek out Westside High, go through an interview process to be considered for attendance and then participate in a lottery in order to gain a spot in the school limits the number of lower-class and students living in poverty who attend the school. The students of Westside High can be characterized as having parents who are involved in their education, have the time to research and seek out schools like Westside High, feel confident enough with the

² Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic domination as the reproduction of inequality, across time, through symbols (Bourdieu, 2001). The reproduction of inequality across time, through symbols occurs when ideas about the operation of society become so ingrained in our everyday conscious, they become normalised or "sedimented". When a social process of inequality becomes normalised through social reproduction, we become unable to tease it apart from non-dominating behaviour. As a result of this normalisation, we are unable to recognise the reproduction of social inequality through participation in a particular social process. Bourdieu refers to these social processes as symbolic violence. In this instance, sedimentation is referring to the way in which behaviours that ensure the continuation of gender inequality have been accepted as "normal" or expected behaviours for teens. These behaviours include, but are not limited to actions such as boys holding up "score cards" for girls as they walk down the hall of the school, whistling and hollering in approval when girls in the school dress in sexualized and revealing ways, grabbing and groping the girls in the hallways, acceptance and encouragement for young women to always be quiet and polite, while expecting boys to be loud and rowdy in the classroom.

education system and have the flexibility and time in their work schedules to go through the interview process. The school is 47% male and 53% female³.

At the time of research there were 27 teachers (23 full-time and 4 part-time) and 7 staff members at Westside High. The six staff members consisted of the principal, the vice principal, four office support staff and the school lifeguard. The teaching staff consisted of 16 women and 11 men. One teacher identified as African-Canadian, one as Eastern-European, one as Russian, one as Asian-Canadian, two as Jewish and the rest were White Canadian or Western European. The staff generally came from middle class origins, however there were two staff members who experienced poverty and lived in social housing as children and one staff member who had access to immeasurable wealth through familial relations and did not make any effort to hide this fact. There was one teacher who identified as a lesbian and two staff members who identified as “queer”, everyone else identified as heterosexual. There were no staff with visible or declared disabilities.

Incitement to Research

According to the CBC, “It’s a girls’ world” (Glazer, 2004). The average person on the street would have a hard time arguing with this statement. In recent months, “Girl Power!!”, “Happy to be a girl”, “Girls Kick Ass” are all statements proudly adorning the t-shirts of adolescent girls that I have seen on the streets of Toronto and Vancouver. With the recent emergence of the term “Girl Power”, in combination with the recent popular culture driven commodification of all-things-girl, there is a public appearance that girls ought and do feel confident in their bodies.

³ This information is from Westside High School Profile, published by the Ontario Ministry of Education, *EQAO 2004 School Profiles*. Toronto, Queens Park Press.

Adding to the pink power craze that has swept North American culture is the emerging moral panic⁴ surrounding girls. This moral panic moves in multiple and often conflicting directions in regards to teen girls. On one side of the argument one has media and academic research pumping out reams of information linking girls to increased violence and increased sexual promiscuity. This argument is impossible to ignore. A review of popular media sources in Canada⁵ revealed NO positive reporting on girls. All the stories talk about girl on girl violence and girls increased sexual promiscuity and increased sexual aggressiveness. The media seems particularly obsessed with reporting stories about girls bullying or assaulting boys (Boston Globe, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Province, CBC). Academic sources are also cashing in on this hysteria surrounding girls and violence. Adding to the perceived “authenticity” of the girl violence craze, academic research has also begun to pump out information surrounding the apparent increase in girl violence and sexual promiscuity (Apter & Ruthella, 1998; Brown, 1998; Innes, 1998; Tanenbaum, 1999; Thompson, 1995).

Another conflicting facet of the moral panic regarding teen girls is the “Ophelia” diagnosis that has become a behavioural expectation for teen girls today (Pipher, 1994). If they are not bullying or having sex, they are losing their confidence and harming themselves, lost in a world of depression and hopelessness until they hit their twenties and magically shake off their depression and find their voice in their early twenties as a “bitch goddess” liberal consumer. The “Ophelia” generation erupted in the early 1990’s

⁴ The expression “moral panic” describes a manufactured, media-driven crisis. In his 1972 book, Stan Cohen (1972) uses the phrase “moral panic” to criticize the media’s vilification of working-class youth subcultures, such as mods and rockers. A moral panic reinforces power relations within society, with those who hold power judging who is valuable and who is dangerous. In this research, moral panic refers to the hysteria perpetuated by the media that constructs girls as “out-of-control”.

⁵ A “google” search undertaken on August 15, 2005, September 15, 2005 and October 15, 2005.

with the publication of Mary Pipher's book, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls in 1994. Casting modern adolescent girls against the Shakespearean heroine Ophelia who drowns herself because she has trouble dealing with issues of loss and rejection as a young woman, Pipher lamented that "the selves of girls ... crash and burn" in our "girl-poisoning culture" (p.26) and "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves" (p. 19). Reviving Ophelia spent over 6 months on the New York Times Best Seller List and spawned or coincided with a number of other books which constructed the female adolescent experience as one of immense turmoil (Orenstein, 1994; Brumberg, 1997; Brown, 1998). Popular media sources also picked up on the "Ophelia" discourse and produced Hollywood movies such as "Mean Girls", "Thirteen" and "Cruel Intentions".

Schooling and gender have also become hotly contested terrain in the gender war on girls. With so much attention being placed on How schools short change girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, American Association of University Women, 1992), it probably was inevitable that sooner or later people would start asking: "But what about the boys?" The insurgence of discourse surrounding girls, boys and schooling proclaiming that girls are out performing boys on standardized tests and that girls outpace boys in university placement (Curriculum Review, 2004; Sommers Hoff, 2000; Manzo, 2004) has made its way into everyday conversation. During a family gathering in May 2005, I told another guest that my research focussed on making schools more equitable for girls. Upon hearing this, the male guest scoffed in response, "How could you possibly think that schools aren't good places for girls, look at what's happening to boys, they are failing

everywhere. In fact, I think if I was in school today, I would probably fail!” With this statement, it becomes clear that there is not only a public perception that girls also feel confident in school, but they do so at the *expense of boys*.

For Foucault (1978) the incitement to discourse regarding sex from the Eighteenth Century onwards was “determination on the part of agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (p. 8). It seems that a similar drive exists these days in relation to girls’ lives. Anita Harris (2003, 2004) attributes this attention on girls to a modern form of regulation and scrutiny in the lives of teen girls. Harris makes two important observations regarding this new found obsession with the lives of teen girls. She suggests that the attention placed on adolescent girls represents the possibilities and anxieties felt during this time of dramatic social change. Girlhood now functions as a space for “worries about unknown futures, ability to succeed in changing circumstances, about the maintenance of hierarchy in changing social landscapes” (Lesko, 2001, as cited in Harris, 2004, p. 2). Secondly, Harris notes that the abundance of information made available about girls makes girls more visible today than ever before. While this may seem a positive step to many, the very prominence of girls in public spaces has left little room for girls themselves to articulate their own notions of complexity, dissent and critiques in relation to all these images of girlhood. Alison Jones (1993) points out that girls become girls by participating within the available sets of social meanings and practises, the discourses, which define them as girls. Harris (2004) proposes that in holding girls up as the exemplars of the new social order, we also construct them to perform this role of super girl. As Harris and Jones note, all of this information available on girls sets a hegemony

of understanding who is a “normal” girl and who is seen as “other” and as a result who will become further marginalized.

Recognizing the regulatory nature of all this attention, panic and scrutiny into the lives of girls seemed more in tune with the experiences that I was having with my female students as their feminist educator. At the same time that the general public was being inundated with propaganda about the achievements of girls, I was dealing with a plethora of young women disclosing distressing information to me about their personal and academic lives. I had young women talking to me about self mutilation, self medication, medically diagnosed depression, disordered eating and countless incidents of sexual harassment happening in the hallways of the school. As the 2001-2002 school year progressed, it was becoming very clear to me that it most definitely was not “A Girl’s World”. However, unlike the singular definitions of girlhood as either a bully, a victim or sexually promiscuous, the girls with whom I worked occupied spaces in between and across these categories. The girls who were talking to me about self mutilation were also getting straight A’s in school. Girls who were exerting an abundance of “Girls Power” confidence were struggling with disordered eating. It appeared that Harris’s suggestion that the new found interest in young women was actually a modern form of regulation and scrutiny was playing itself out on the bodies of my female students. As a feminist social justice educator, my interest in research lay in trying to account for the gap between the mounting public perceptions about girls and reality that I was facing as a teacher of young women who occupied spaces in between these unwavering constructions of girlhood. It is this lack of focus on the complexities of the realities of girls’ lives and the gap between the public perception of girls and the reality that we were

facing in school that I took not only as a starting point for my research, but also as an incitement to start the Girls' Nite program at Westside High.

The Girls' Nite Program

The History of Girls' Nite

"I think this brings the total to 15 now. 15 girls in the school that have come to me to talk about depression and or all of its various symptoms, disordered eating, cutting, self medicating, I am beginning to lose track of who is doing what to themselves. Perhaps I have to start making a diagram or chart or something. I am being an ass right now, this is not something to joke about, a poor attempt at levity. 15 must be a magic number because I finally talked to Jill about it today and she mentioned that she has about the same number of girls talking to her about their battles with various forms of depression, only she seems to have a lot more that are being medicated by their family doctors. We decided that we would both try to find some guiding information out there somewhere, wherever out there is. I called the Clarke Institute today and spoke to a really helpful woman. There is an info night next week regarding adolescent girls and depression, we are going to attend." (Personal Journal entry, January 18, 2002)

The information night I mention was held at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, at the branch known as the Clarke Institute in downtown Toronto. Jill and I headed off together to try to find some answers, some information or some resources that we could use to work with the numerous young women who were talking to each of us. At this session we were talked to and at by a number of professionals who work in the field of mental health specializing in dealing with adolescent girls. There was one young woman who did not have professional credentials behind her name and it was her story that resonated with us. Tara was a 21 year old university student. She had grown up in a haughty suburb of the city, was captain of the volleyball team and a relatively high achieving student when she was hit with depression at the age of 15. She shared her story, her struggles and her fight toward recovery with the crowd. She stated that one of the most important parts of her recovery was meeting other young women who were

suffering from depression as well. It helped her feel less isolated and more supported. She stated “the feeling of community that I felt while I was with that support group was immeasurable in my recovery” (notes taken at the meeting). Jill and I left the meeting feeling both icky and inspired. Icky because of the number of people who spoke to us encouraging prescription medication to solve the problems young women were facing but inspired by Tara’s words. On the way home, we discussed possible ways to bring the various young women who had spoken to us about their struggles together, to create a network of support for each other so that they would each know that they were not the only ones dealing with these issues.

At the same time that Jill and I were trying to pull together something for the young women struggling with depression, a group of senior girls approached us with concerns about the sexual safety of the younger girls in the school. From the perspective of these older female students, the younger female students, mainly in grade ten, were both being put at risk by senior male students and putting themselves at risk by seeking out the sexual approval of these same male students. The grade eleven and twelve boys were making “booty bets”, which in simple terms refers to a contest to see who could get the most “notches in their belt” before the end of the school year. According to these older female students, the younger students were all too willing to participate in this game in hopes of gaining popularity with the older boys in the school.

Recognizing that our one on one “listening” was proving to be ineffectual in dealing with the seemingly rising number of issues faced by the young women in our school, Jill and I sought board resources that might aid in the issues we were dealing with. Working in the school system the resources that we had readily available to us to

address the problems faced by the young women in our schools proved to be very limited. Our principal pointed us in the direction of a school social worker. The suggested social worker visited the school for one hour every two weeks. Furthermore, we were hoping to find something that would be preventative, instead of the usual response of the school board which seemed to always be reacting to a crisis instead of trying to prevent it. As we very quickly drained the possible resources available to us, it became apparent that it was going to be up to us to create the program we were hoping to find already in existence in North America's fifth largest school board. Remembering the words of Tara, that community was the best aid in her recovery, Jill and I set out to create a community of women in our school to help each other address these issues that so many of them were facing in isolation. It was in this vein that Girls' Nite was born.

A small group of girls was recruited to help us devise a plan to create community amongst the young women of our school. Within this group were a number of the students who were disclosing the most distressing information regarding self harm to Jill and I mixed in with many of the young women that the senior girls had expressed concern about. It was through this planning group that the format of Girls' Nite emerged. After discussing many possible events and scenarios to reach our goal, one idea resonated the most with the planning team. The girls decided that a sleepover, held in the school was the best way to reach the goal of building community amongst the female students. There were many factors that went into this decision. The girls were adamant that the event take place in the school so that people couldn't use the excuse that "things are different at school" or "this could never happen at school". The girls were also adamant that this be a female only space. They felt that there were too many girls in crisis and too

many issues for them to face as a group before they could begin to bridge the gender gap with the boys of the school. For all these reasons an overnight sleepover, to take place in the school on a Friday night with various sessions including guest speakers, discussion groups and activities, was the format decided on. The planning team divided up the task list, assigning themselves and Jill and I each jobs and we set off to make Girls' Nite a reality.

As was previously mentioned in the description of Westside High, it is a comparatively liberal school, with a principal who is willing to create space for programming that questions regulatory boundaries placed on people by a larger social order. Although there is a progressive air to Westside High, it does not escape the systemic forms of oppression that exist in organised social institutions. In fact, the progressive feeling and programming often masks dominance and oppression in a cloak of "it doesn't/can't happen at Westside". As the organizing for Girls' Nite got underway an example of the sedimented gender domination began to surface in the various spaces and places⁶ within the school locale.

Resistance to Girls' Nite was felt on many levels and caused numerous complex responses from the young women organizing the event. Resistance to the event was expressed from various places within the school including, but not limited, to the male student population, teachers and administrators. The way that the girls responded to this resistance proved to be one of the most intriguing and moving aspects of the entire Girls'

⁶ This refers to Doreen Massey's (1994) definitions of place as stable, space as mobile and contested. In referring to the places and spaces of schooling, a place would be a physically constructed area, such as a classroom or hallway. The space would be the area that fills those classrooms and hallways, such as student ideas, opinions and interactions.

the agenda of Girls' Nite. This was entitled, "The History of Feminism" and was going to be run by Jill.

The Night of Girls' Nite: Reimagining Girlhood

The evening of Girls' Nite had finally arrived. We had 40 young women from all grades signed up to attend. Speakers were coming from across the city to run a variety of sessions ranging from "Women and Spirituality" to "Healthy Sexuality" to "Wen-Do (Women's Self Defense)". There were non-gender stereotyping movies, such as "Tank Girl" and DVD's of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" for girls to watch if they wanted. We had organized a large potluck dinner, each attendee bringing some food for a large sit-down dinner for all the girls to eat together. There was a meditation room, an arts and crafts space, a dancing room and a quiet room. The participants arrived at 5:00 pm on Friday evening and were greeted by the organizing committee for registration. Here each girl chose the sessions she wanted to attend before being led to the gymnasium for "Wen-Do" which was the one session that all the young women had to do and it was done by all the girls together. Following "Wen-Do" the participants gathered for a meal together. After dinner the young women split up to attend two sessions of their own choice. There were four sessions running during each timeslot, each for 1 hour. Following the two session there was "free time" for the rest of the evening, starting at 10:00 pm. On Saturday morning, the young women were woken up for yoga at 9:00 am, followed by breakfast and a brief closing ceremony for the shredding of the "Wall of Regrets".

Two non-scheduled aspects of the night were the "Wall of Hopes" and the "Wall of Regrets". These "walls" were two large posters with their respective titles painted across the middle of long strips of butcher paper (the long rolls of brown paper found in

the dark corners of every art room in any school). On the "Wall of Regrets" the young women in attendance were encouraged to anonymously write the biggest regrets that they may be carrying around with them at that time. During the closing ceremonies we would shred the wall of regrets, symbolically shredding the emotional baggage attached to the regrets. The "Wall of Regrets" was placed in a private classroom with instructions written on a piece of paper outside the classroom. Girls were asked to respect the privacy of those inside the room by doing things such as asking if it was okay to enter if another girl was in the room. The "Wall of Hopes" was placed in the hallway of the school and girls were encouraged to write their hopes and dreams not only for the evening, but for the future. Both of these posters proved to be very popular pieces of the Girls' Nite experience.

The most notable phenomenon of Girls' Nite did not happen in one of the organized sessions, nor can it be narrowed down to one particular moment. It was the feeling in the building and amongst the girls that coalesced as the night progressed. As the young women moved through each session designed to bring awareness, community and build consciousness, a feeling began to develop amongst the young women. At the beginning of the night there was the usual "cliques" of friends, sticking together through the large group Wen-Do and the meal together; however, as the night progressed the walls and social barriers that are the norm during a regular school day began to crumble. The young women were talking with each other in circles in the hallway. As they talked, they lay, bodies sprawled across the floors, laughter and giggling began to fill the hallways. In other rooms, moments of disclosure led to group hugs and intimate bonds that were carried out into the hallways and transformed into laughter. Slowly, very

slowly the young women began to feel physically comfortable in the school, making statements such as, “I have never laid down in the halls like this before” and “You are so cool; why haven’t we talked at school before?” As the midnight giggles set-in, music filled the hallways. At one end of the hallway, there were young women playing their own instruments, writing and performing their own songs. At the other end of the hallway, tucked in the drama room loud “pop” music could be heard interrupted by the occasional sound of laughter erupting in the room. This was the newly designate “dancing room”, where the young women were dancing with each other in a large circle, teaching each other the latest dance moves and encouraging each other to “move your hips”, “move your arms”, “put your soul into it, feel it sister!”

It is important to note that all of this was occurring during “free time” in the schedule. None of these events were planned or scheduled, although they had certainly been hoped for. It is hard to put into words and then put those words on a page, the feeling that was present in the school during these moments. Imagine at one end of the hall, a group of girls, sitting in a circle, laughing while they are playing guitars and djembes⁷. Further down the hall, another group of girls, sprawled across the hall in various positions of lounging, drawing and painting. Further down the hall, another group of girls were all eating various sugar and fat laden foods such as cookies, chocolate, microwave popcorn and chips that were left over from dinner or brought to be snacks. In all of these groups the girls were talking, talking about their lives, their dreams, their experiences. We are under the impression that we value girls’ voices in society today. However, as I watched these events unfold I realized that we have not created the space for girls to listen to each other, listen to themselves and speak from

⁷ A djembe is a West African hand drum popular with the students at Westside during the first Girls Nite.

their hearts about their dreams and ideas and hopes for the future. This moment struck me as the most profound part of Girls' Nite. There was a lot of education in the sessions and a lot of really valuable discussion and information generated. However, it was seeing the girls reaching out to each other, supporting each other, laughing with each other and EATING with each other was emotional. It was one of those moments when you don't know something is missing until you find it or see it. I did not realize, in all my business as a teacher, that I had never seen the female students of the school sprawled out across the hallways, taking up A LOT of space. I have never seen a group of female students eating, pigging out actually, on junk food. These moments struck a chord as I watched the community being built before my eyes.

These moments also struck a chord with some of the other students present. It was around midnight when one of the senior students came to staff room to ask me for some feedback on an idea that she had. She had made note of the same instances that I had, the way the girls were using the space of the school. She had participated in conversations throughout the night and heard many of the young women present make statements such as, "I love being in the school right now, I thought I would hate it, being here on a Friday night, but I feel so at home" and "Wow, it feels so different to be here with just girls". These statements made Marjorie wonder why it was that the girls were feeling so different, so positive, so free in the school at this moment as opposed to a regular school day. She wanted to try to figure it out with the other girls attending the event and asked me what I thought of trying to gather the participants together for a discussion on the topic. I encouraged her, telling her I was wondering the same thing. Marjorie walked the halls, telling the young women what she wanted to talk about and

asking that anyone interested in figuring out why they felt so different that night should meet in the library in a few minutes for a discussion. Every girl at the event showed up for this discussion.

It was here that the girls began to recognize and unpack the domination and oppression that regulated their experience during the regular school day. They all agreed that the major missing element at Girls' Nite was boys. Questions began to surface. "What does that mean?", "I like boys, I get along with boys, I don't fight with boys, but I am definitely feeling different tonight, why?", "Why have I never spoken to you before tonight?", "Where else do we get to do this, just talk about ourselves and work on our own shit?" The questions were hard to answer, but the conversation kept returning to "boys". The larger group of young women were beginning to recognize notions of surveillance and regulation⁸ and the impact that these methods of oppression had on their everyday school lives. Also becoming apparent to the girls in this discussion was the idea of performing⁹ their gender. Without the regulation and surveillance of gender expectations, the young women took over the space of the school in a very physical and visceral manner, one that is usually reserved for boys. They were beginning to realize that a lot of their daily actions in school were mere performances of how and what they thought a girl should be.

What is important to note in this conversation is the admission of gender play by the young women at the event. The girls began to understand how they were complicit in their own subjectification and began to imagine ways that they could disrupt this power imbalance. At this moment, the girls agreed that the most important thing they could do

⁸ These ideas as they apply to the Girls' Nite girls will be discussed at greater length in chapter 3.

⁹ Butler's notions about performativity as well as how they relate to this research will be discussed at greater length in chapter 3.

was continue to build and nurture the friendships that were developing at Girls' Nite. In this space, the resistant nature of Girls' Nite, one in which the girls began to organize and make change for themselves, was born. Girls' Nite offered the girls a way to make connections with other girls who share and identify with their experiences and allowed them to communicate their thoughts and feelings in a safe community of other women. The girls talked about supporting each other and made a "pact" to end the "bitchiness" that they realized they put onto each other on a daily basis. Marjorie pointed out the difficulty in this task, pressing the girls to stand by their words. She also reminded and pushed the girls that the real test in all this talk was going to come on Monday morning and all the Monday mornings after that. It was in this discussion that the community of women who would become the foundation for Girls' Nite was born.

Monday morning came and Marjorie's prodding seemed to work. The girls who attended Girls' Nite walked the halls hugging each other, complimenting each other and smiling at each other and themselves. Girls' Nite happened at the end of the school year, May 30-31, so there was not much time to continue the work in unpacking gender binaries that was started at the first Girls' Nite. However, many of the girls who attended began to push for the event to happen again next year, only next time they wanted it earlier in the year.

And so it happened earlier the next school year. The school year kicked off with a "Young Women's Discussion Group" run by Jill and in response to the anti-female backlash the year before and the direction the Girls' Nite was taking, that of questioning gender binaries and unpacking oppression and domination attached to gender, another pro-feminist male teacher started the "Young Men's Discussion Group". The young

women's discussion group continued the line of open and supportive communication present at Girls Nite. The young men began to tackle issues of gender and masculinity, while the young women began to tackle issues of gender and expectations surrounding femininity. Girls' Nite ran an awareness day in December that school year in recognition of the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre on Dec. 6th. Signs and buttons were placed throughout the school "calling out" sexism around the school. The buttons read "This is what a feminist looks like" and "Feminism spoke here". The posters had similar slogans, such as, "What part of no don't you understand?" as well as quotes by famous feminists from history. There was even an "I spy sexism" (thirdwavefoundation.org) campaign organized in which any student in the school could pick up a 3 X 5 inch recipe card and anonymously report instances of sexism that they saw throughout the school. In this campaign, the girls began to reverse the gaze and surveillance that has dominated their lives for so long.

The actual Girls' Nite sleepover was held on January 15th 2004, that school year and the sessions were heavily focussed on gender awareness, with titles such as "Myth behind Shaving: Embracing Body Hair", "Indirect Violence" (tackling issues of gossip between girls), "How language shapes our identity" (which focussed on the various words used for femininity and masculinity and how language creates the gendered identities), "Harm Reduction" (addressing issues of self harm amongst young women). There were also some fun sessions such as "Wen-Do" which all the girls from the year before had reported was one of their favourite and most influential sessions, as well as "Belly Dancing" and "Arts and Crafts".

Once again, the event had the same impact on the young women attending as the year previous. The second year, there were 60 young women to spread themselves throughout the second floor of Westside High. By midnight, bodies were sprawled across the hallway, music filled the air, dancing took over one entire end of the school, food was everywhere and laughter and giggling was the common sound heard throughout the school. Girls sat in small clusters talking about tough issues, such as abortion, sexuality and body image. They also sat in small clusters giggling and singing and talking about their vision for “transforming” Westside High so that they could feel this way all the time. Once again, they realized that the action had to start amongst themselves and they had to set the example of how to treat each other if they wanted others, mainly the boys, to start treating them differently.

By this point the space of the school was becoming much more gender aware. Most were supportive of the idea, but there was still some resistance to new space that the girls took up in the hallways and classrooms of the school. A further analysis of the power of this space will be discussed in Chapter 4. What is important to note for this introduction is the way that the girls of Westside High began to organize and transform the space of their school in order to make it a more girl friendly space. The eight young women interviewed for this research participated in this transformation to varying degrees. However, each of them is adamant that Girls’ Nite was responsible for creating positive change both in the school and in their lives.

Counternarratives: Taking back their identity

Butler (1993) argues that “There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (p. 9). Butler (1992) also suggests that “if

the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and time again” (p. 13). Referring back to the research question, “How has your involvement with Girls’ Nite influenced your gendered identity formation?”, this research explores issues surrounding gendered identity construction, including power, performativity and resistance. The impact that Girls’ Nite has had not only on the 8 young women interviewed for this research, but also on the space of Westside High exemplifies Butler’s notion that there is no power that acts, only a reiterated acting that is power. Through the provision of a safe place for discussion and the creation of a space of community and support, the Girls’ Nite girls were able to discover and create a counter narrative to the prevailing discourse about girlhood in today’s society. Through the creation of a counter narrative to the modern construction of girlhood, the young women in this study were able to find and utilize power to negotiate their gendered identity in a secondary school setting, a setting that arguably produces and reproduces gender domination.

Furthermore, this research will analyse what impact the young women in this study had on the place and space of Westside High in their attempts to disrupt traditional power relations through performing their gender in a way that allowed them to inscribe their own definition of power on, through and in their own bodies. The way the young women see themselves and how they are seen by teachers shifts in a counter intuitive way as their involvement with Girls’ Nite deepened. As the girls began to feel powerful in their own bodies, teachers began to see the girls as trouble makers, bullies or “feminists”. However, the more people resisted the change in these young women, the more the young

women were determined to change. This research provides insight into ways that schools can work to challenge prevailing discourse around gender norms through a post-structural feminist analysis of the Girls' Nite program which examines the complex power regimes that were disrupted and reconstituted through the existence of such a program.

What does not happen in this research

In the next chapter the reader will be introduced to the young women who participated in this research project. One may or may not make note of the fact that the racial make up of the young women in the project does not correspond to the racial make up of the student population at Westside High. There is an over representation of white girls within this research project. Most of the young women for this project were chosen due to their past involvement with the program and their dedicated involvement with the program from its beginning. The fact that most of these girls are white can be accounted for in exploring the historical roots of the Girls' Nite program. As noted, Girls' Nite began in response to a trend amongst the female students of the school that was noticed by myself and Jill in regards to the number of young women who were medicated for various forms of depression. Historically, young women of colour have not been diagnosed with depression or been given access to the medical system in the same manner as their white counter parts. As the program grew and developed into the progressive gender awareness program that we see today, more young women of colour began to participate in the events and join the organizing committee. By the third Girls' Nite the number of young women of colour attending the event was actually disproportionately larger than the number of students of colour represented within the school population.

As one reads through this document one may or may not note a lack of analysis regarding both race and class and the manner in which these factors intersect to shape a young woman's experience during girlhood. This was an intentional decision by me in order to focus the research specifically on gender. I recognize that these factors of a person's identity cannot, in reality be teased apart with such ease. However for the sake of this research, I decided to focus specifically on girlhood at Westside High. This is not to argue that girlhood does not encompass issues such as race and class; however, there is limited space with which one can argue within a Master's thesis and I choose the themes that were the most important to the long term participants of the Girls' Nite program. In Chapter 4 there is a critique of the program and within this chapter I offer a discussion on young women of colour and how and where they fit into the Girls' Nite program within Westside High.

What comes next?

As an educator, I am concerned with the limitations and possibilities offered within the public school setting. Through this research I wanted to understand some specific aspects of gender and schooling. I was looking to expand the current discourse on girlhood, as it did not gel with my experience of the messy, complicated but powerful nature of the lives of the girls. With the overwhelming amount of negative attention focussed on girls, I also wanted to explore something positive about young women. The Girls' Nite program provides an example of young women organizing themselves to resist the multiple constructions of femininity that have come to dominate popular media and academic discussions on girls. 'Girls' Nite' is an example of both the limitations and possibilities of the public school setting. Utilizing the words and films of the young

women involved in Girls' Nite, this research will provide an analysis of this program in order to understand the complexities and benefits of running a school based program for girls that opens up a space and place for questioning of current expectations of gendered identity within a space that arguably reinforces stable notions of gendered identity.

Before you begin the next chapter, myself and the young women with whom I conducted this research ask you to watch the DVD provided with three films created by some of the Girls' Nite girls. These films are not chapters in themselves or appendixes to the research document. Rather they are the research and as such are embedded within the research document. Attempting to disrupt traditional notions of research was an important goal of this research in order to ensure that the knowledge produced by the girls was accessible and user friendly. There is a greater discussion on these films in chapter two. This research is divided into five chapters. In chapter two I outline my theoretical framework and methodological dilemmas as well as justify the methodologies chosen for this research. In chapter three I look deeper into issues of power and schooling and ways in which Girls' Nite influenced these ideas for the girls in relation to their identity formation. Chapter four is a critique of the program and examines the complexities of running a gender specific program within a public school setting. Chapter four also examines the way that two of the young women in this project interacted with these notions of power and agency and the influence these interactions had on the young women as well as Westside High. Chapter five is the conclusion and will draw together all the chapters to examine the way that involvement in the Girls' Nite program influences the gendered identity formation of the eight young women within this research.

CHAPTER TWO
METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
Issues of voice and representation

no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority (hooks, 1990, p. 151-152).

Voices-literally the words-of children of all ages can never be heard enough in educational research, especially the stories and perspectives of marginalized, “dangerous,” or “damaged” youth (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p. 441).

Theoretical Framework:

Poststructuralist Feminist Research

This research is grounded in a feminist poststructuralist (Britzman, 1995; Davies, 1993; Davies and Banks, 1992; Ellsworth, 1992; Jones, 1993; Lather, 2001; Orner, 1992; Walkerdine, 1986, 1990a, b, 1997) analysis. Poststructuralism is often criticized for being paralytic and divisive (McLaren, 1993; Dillabough, 2002); however, rather than living in “paralyzing ambivalence” (Jones, 1993), feminist poststructuralism allows for an investigation that recognizes complexities and embraces uncertainties (Walkerdine, 1986). Poststructuralist thought allows for new possibilities to understand girls’ socialization in ways that go beyond seeing girls primarily as ‘disadvantaged’ and socialized predominantly within an oppressive patriarchal structure.

Feminist research in education has traditionally focused on ‘girls’ disadvantage’ in education (Arnot, 1999, 2000, 2002; Gaskell, 1992). While this methodology is useful, it is important to move beyond presenting girls as only ‘done to’ and begin recognizing the contributions they are making to shaping their own existence. This is a slippery slope to approach, as there are concerns about understanding the obstacles that

girls are still facing in both education and society at large. Therefore, investigating from a poststructuralist perspective allows me to account, at least in part, for the multiple positions that girls occupy in their everyday lives.

Similarly, I would argue that it is important not to present these girls as passively shaped by active others (Davies & Banks, 1992). Rather, the analytical frame from which I proceed is that girls that actively 'take up as their own, the discourses through which they are shaped' (Davies & Banks, 1992, p 3). An example of this is to look at the ways in which teen girls derive pleasure from looking at the bodies of female models while simultaneously rejecting the ways in which women's bodies are constructed to be looked at. This demonstrates how girls might think critically about their own bodies, while at the same time expressing the notion that women should accept and celebrate their own bodies (Jones, 1993).

Poststructuralism provides a conceptual language which transcends traditional dualistic notions such as agency/structure that have clouded education research focussed on girls. Through this transcendence, poststructuralism simultaneously encourages this research to multiply locate the girls with whom I conducted this work while rejecting the possibility of ambiguously lumping them together as 'disadvantaged'. This blurring of binary constructions also allows us to begin to question the use of the term 'girl'. Poststructuralism allows us to simultaneously use and reject the term, as was often done by the girls in this research. As Yates (1990), articulates "Where and how is it helpful to treat girls as a single category? and Where and how is it important to focus on differences among girls?"(p.40).

Discourse, Identity, Power, Agency and Resistance: Definitions and Complications

As I begin to map out the conceptual field of this study, there is a tension within attempts to define the concepts of identity, power and agency. In dealing with each separately, I can draw attention to their conceptual distinction. After all, these are specific words and concepts that address different social phenomena. However, it is equally important to bear in mind the relationship between these concepts, their discourses and the way that they converge in academic and popular use. As this study will indicate, identity may function as power and power as identity. I want to bring attention to the notions that such convergences lend to the ambiguous qualities of these categories. Therefore, instead of dealing with each concept independently, I will build a discussion around how the concepts intertwine with each other, specifically in reference to the experience of the girls within this study. I stress the convergences because in society at large, as well as within the academy, issues surrounding identity, gender, power and agency are often discussed as fixed entities rather than slippery and shifting.

As will be demonstrated and discussed in the ensuing chapters, the young women often utilized concepts of power, identity, gender and agency in contradicting and counteracting ways; both slippery and shifting and fixed and permanent within their daily lives. There were moments with the girls when I saw the famous theoretical debate between Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler about agency and identity play itself out in the actions and words of the 'Girls' Nite girls'. Adding to this debate, power seemed to always be entangled within these moments. In relation to agency, Benhabib (1992) argues that the subject must have agency to assert oneself against the state in order to gain rights. Conversely, Butler (1990) argues that in the act of asserting agency, the subject engages in an act of domination by performing a role that perpetuates regulation.

The girls spoke from different voices at different moments within their daily existence, responding to issues of subjectivity and agency in shifting and opposing ways which were heavily dictated by the particular identity the girls were embodying at the time. They embodied Benhabib's definition of agency through the very act of organizing Girls' Nite. However they also personified Butler's arguments by refusing to engage with the boys who challenged the possibilities of Girls' Nite, instead embracing and subverting the very terms that were intended to further oppress the girls. In doing so the girls exemplified Butler's argument that power was in not making a claim against sources of power because in doing so you recognize and validate that power.

This research builds upon these discussions of agency in that it uses everyday actions to substantiate and add to feminist theories that view girls as capable countercultural agents; in other words, I argue that girls *can* and *do* create social and political change *in the midst* of the constraints of discourse and material structure on their ability to act. I also acknowledge the power grid that guides girls' varying capacities to affect change based on racial, ethnic, economic, age (etc.) differences, and therefore, like Butler (1990), believe that "to be constituted by discourse is not to be determined by discourse, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency" (143). I am also careful not to reinforce a heroic picture of these girls as individual free-thinkers and actors, and as such, inquire how agency is in/formed by the *self-in-relation* (to other people, to social institutions and so on).

Examining how the girls are shaped in relations to others requires an examination of the ways that power circulated within Westside High between the staff, students and

other actors within the school. Foucault (1976) views power not as held or isolated in an individual or an institution, but rather as something that circulates. He states,

Power is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation" (p. 98)

This definition of power informs in interesting ways the manner in which power was played out and negotiated by the Girls' Nite girls at Westside High. The girls both affected the traditional power holders in the school, the staff and administration and were effected by these power holders. The girls utilized their power differently on an individual level, while at the same time, organizing as a group to impact the school setting as a whole. Recognizing the multidirectional and netlike function of power is useful in order to grapple with the way that each of the young women involved in Girls' Nite were able to deploy the power obtained through the program for the purpose of their own articulation (Butler, 1993, p.18).

Examining how the girls were able to deploy power for the purpose of their own articulation requires a longer discussion on how discourse and power juxtapose each other for the girls within this study. In different academic fields, discourse is often defined "as a collection of statements and ideas that produces networks of meanings" (Yon, 2000, p.3). Networks such as these become the conceptual framework and classificatory models for mapping the world around us. Thus, discourse shapes how we come to think and produce new knowledge and facilitates shared understandings and engagements about particular subjects. Yon (2000) also notes, that while discourse may facilitate thought and action, it can also work to constrain as it sets up the parameters,

limits and “blind spots” (p.3) of thinking and acting. As discourse positions the subject and facilitates the subject in the social world, it also disciplines and constrains the subject, “tying the individual to their own identity” [Foucault, 1983, as cited in Alcoff, 1988, p. 16].

As Yon and Alcoff point out, the power of discourse is productive and works in multidirectional ways. An example of the multidirectional ways that discourse influenced the girls is the excitement and ambivalence that they felt in relation to the social category of “girl”. The girls felt both empowered to act, but also constrained in the way they could act. As the girls within this research demonstrate, emerging as agents of knowledge is intricately linked to expressions and utilization of power. As we will see in the proceeding chapters, knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance within this research. This will become clearer when we see how the young women within this research acted both with and against the power of identity categories.

Identity is also an important part of this discussion on discourse. Stuart Hall (1992) identifies the “social psychological” aspect of human subjectivity. In this model, the subject is conceptualized through symbolic interaction between the individual and what Mead and others term “significant others”. Therefore, the process of identity is just that, a process of exchange between the self and other which may be contradictory and fragmented. This fragmentation and interaction leads to multiple and competing identities vying for safety and security within and against each other. This notion of the subject and competing identities does not mean that that identity cannot produce feelings of rootedness, security and coherence. Instead, it recognizes that such feelings arise from

the constructing and situating the self within and against discourses. Hall reminds us that this means identity exists in relation to representations that “anchor the subject in the social world” (277).

Recognizing Hall’s concept of the subject within the social world as a major force in the shaping of identity, this research utilizes Anne Locke Davidson’s (1996) definition of identity as the “presentation of self in a matrix of social relationships¹⁰ – a pattern of social assertions that significant others recognize and come to expect” (p. 2). As the young women created and produced new knowledge about what it meant for them to be a “girl” and a “woman,” they began to present themselves differently within their “matrix of social relationships”. The ways in which these differences were presented was heavily influenced by the power involved within particular interactions of the social matrix.

Using this idea of identity allows and encourages the exploration of a girl’s process of presenting her way into existence through involvement in Girls’ Nite, while at the same time subjecting herself to the constitutive force and regulative norms of the very issues she is organizing around. When thought of in conjunction with Foucault’s notion of power, this explanation of identity makes allowances for how one might invest in competing discourses simultaneously (Gonick, 2003 p.10). In their daily lives, the girls in this study engaged in several simultaneous and often contradictory positionings. For example, Izzy was often very assertive and independent in her feelings around Girls’ Nite and the importance of issues that Girls’ Nite took up but could also be very sensitive to and feel controlled by others opinions of her. Rachel was a high achieving, hard

¹⁰ For the purpose of this research, “matrix of social relationships” refers to the numerous surrounding influences within the girls’ social lives. These include, but are not limited too, peers, friends, colleagues, family, teachers and media.

working, self-identified feminist who wore highly feminine clothing¹¹ and would routinely defer to boys in her social and academic pursuits.

The way the young women embodied issues of power, identity and agency and the way that these concepts interact to influence each other within this research illustrate why it is almost impossible to discuss these terms in isolation from each other. The examples provided here also demonstrate the difficulty in choosing one particular theoretical definition for each of these concepts. The way these theoretical debates played out in the daily lives of the girls exemplify the subtle and complex conversations possible in regards to these conceptual issues as well as the difficulty in defining these concepts for the purpose of this research. I would like to see this research trouble and complicate the way we discuss these concepts and terms, specifically in relation to young women. Therefore one purpose of this research is to challenge and complicate the way we think of research with teen girls. As the examples within this section demonstrate, defining these messy concepts in a finite and independent manner runs counter the experiences that I had with the girls at Westside High. It is within these inconsistencies and gaps in definitions that opportunities for resistance and change were developed by the girls and will be explored through this research. Rather than viewing the difficulty in defining these terms as a hurdle or stumbling block within this research, I believe that these tensions open up discussion around ways to continue to talk about these crucial issues when consensus on their meanings seems no longer is possible.

¹¹ An exception to her highly feminine style was when Rachel would wear the school issued track/sweat pants to school. On these days Rachel would state, "I couldn't be bothered to be a girl today".

Research Methodology:

Setting the Research Stage: Gaps in Methodology

When I decided to focus my research on Girls' Nite and the young women that I had been working with so closely as their teacher and advisor for two years prior to starting my MA, I worried about issues of voice and representation. "Voices-literally the words-of children of all ages can never be heard enough in educational research, especially the stories and perspectives of marginalized, "dangerous," or "damaged" youth" (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p. 441). During the early stages of my studies, I continually felt dissatisfied with the way girls were represented within academic research. What was most puzzling and unnerving for me was the way the young women were represented within research that was supposed to be empowering or at the very least disruptive to traditional notions of girlhood. Research was often compiled into nice, neat papers, laying out nice, neat arguments, utilizing quotes from interview participants that were selected because of how well they fit into the nicely packaged research format. As has been previously stated, having worked closely with young women, I was keenly aware that their stories, lives and experiences were not nice neat packages. Therefore, traditional methods of representation were not going to work if I was going to do research with the "Girls' Nite girls".

My struggles with the way young women were represented in academic research were brought to life when I took six of the Girls' Nite girls to a national academic conference on Girl Studies in November, 2004. This experience also left me feeling dissatisfied and frustrated with various research methodologies. More often than not, the young women left their chosen sessions feeling lost, confused, misrepresented and

“stupid”. At the end of each conference day we (the other staff members and myself) were debriefing the young women in attendance, assuring them that they were not stupid, that it was the inadequate research methods and presentation formats utilized by the researchers at the conference that was the problem, not their level of intellect or their experiences of being young women. During a presentation focussing on young women and their sexuality, I watched as Melody worked up the courage to ask a presenter to define the word “bifurcate”. Melody stated that she was very interested in the researcher’s topic but she could not understand what the researcher was trying to say. This particular presenter could not break down her language or her methodology in a way that Melody could understand. The researcher just kept repeating the word and eventually, in a moment of frustration told Melody to look it up in a dictionary because the dictionary could explain it better then she could. As I watched this moment unfold, DeCean’s (2001) question, “Who gets silenced so you can speak?” rattled through my brain.

The incident with Melody was not the only upsetting moment at the conference. At this same conference, two of the young women from Girls’ Nite were scheduled to make a presentation on the Girls’ Nite program. The school had been contacted by conference organizers who had heard about Girls’ Nite and asked the staff members to present at the conference. As staff, we turned the presentation over to the girls, who put together a jaw dropping 45 minute presentation. However, after two days at the conference the two young women scheduled to make the presentation began to feel “underqualified”. Both of these events and the girls’ reactions to them told me that there

was something wrong with the way we, as academics, were writing young women into the academy.

I left this conference with my head shaking. Wondering, questioning, struggling, was it possible for me to do “academic” research with the girls and not alienate them further? As previously stated my vision of education is to create a space where all students can exchange knowledge and build communities across generations and diverse cultures. The alienation that the girls experienced at this conference ran counter to my belief in the purpose of education. I also left wondering if the girl studies research movement had forgotten the historical battle waged by feminist researchers to have women represented within academic research.

Feminist researchers have struggled throughout research paradigms to bring to the forefront the contestability of academic “truth claims” about women (Lather 1991). Lather traces this feminist concern to Audre Lorde’s (1984) call for tools of knowledge production based on subaltern ways of knowing which had previously been excluded from academic conversation. Feminist researchers have sought to include as valid such counter ways of knowing as personal voice, personal diaries and journals, interactive interview formats and practises such as co-writing in academic research. Feminist researchers have continually rejected the idea of speaking “for” and replaced it with ways of writing that are viewed as dialogic and egalitarian. These new methods were viewed as a way to accomplish the “feminist political agenda” of recovering lost voices previously ignored and empowering research subjects through the research process.

Drawing on Foucault’s notion of “regime of truth”, Gore (1992) suggests that the conceptualization of power, empowerment and knowledge internal to critical and

feminist discourses is problematic. After attending the conference on girlhood, I found that Gore's argument resonated with me. The conference in Montreal encompassed Gore's ideas around the "what can we do for you?" paradigm of empowerment. The presumption is that the individual doing the empowering, the usually white, Western, middle-class teacher/researcher has already conclusively dealt with her own inscription and involvement in oppressive power dynamics and is now in a position to pass that power onto an oppressed Other. McRobbie (1982) points out this stance is patronizing with respect to research based on/for girls. She asks, "How can *we* assume *they* need anything done for them in the first place? And conversely that we have anything real to offer them?" (p. 52). Walkerdine (1990) suggests that we start asking what the feminist investment is in "making them see?" (p. 200). Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) also addresses the interstices of power, knowledge and desire within the research process. She writes, "What do I want wanting to know, you or me?" (p. 76). Recognizing that these questions were being asked within academia provided a valuable grounding point for the questions I had about my own research. They also provided me with hope that it would be possible to "research" Girls' Nite in a way that was both academically rigorous and ethically viable.

Issues of voice and the call for voice have been problematic in the past. Orner (1992) suggests the problems lie in presuming that voices and identities are singular, unchanging and unaffected by the context in which the speaking occurs. This problematising proved true when, during our interview, in a moment of particular clarity, Marcia said to me, "I am sorry I am not making much sense; I am really noticing the recorder right now." Institutional and historical constraints in this call for voice were

evident as the girls and I set out to determine a way to have the young women heard in this research project. Throughout the beginning stages of this research project, institutional and historical constraints became evident as the young women and I set out to determine a way to have their voice heard and seen within the project. Institutionally, at the university level there was a notion that *I* needed to create a research project that the girls could have access to and gain knowledge and power from. However, for the girls and I, this notion only reinforced the construction of the teacher/researcher as the singular provider of voice. This did little to shift the power relations that the organizers, including the girls and myself, had set out to transform with Girls' Nite and also spoke to the patronizing methodologies available to us. We needed to find a way to put the young women in the project at the centre of knowledge production, because it was their experience and their knowledge that was creating this research.

Through careful and thoughtful negotiation with the young women involved in the study, documentary film was chosen as the best medium through which the young women could gather their own data and convey their own feelings regarding Girls' Nite for this research. There were numerous reasons why the participants in this study felt that documentary film was the best way for the academy to hear and see their voices. These reasons vary across the spectrum from logistical to theoretical. Logistically, Westside High is home to a burgeoning film studies program that was popular with many of the girls in the project. Within this program, a documentary film class had peaked many of the girls' interests and they were keen to attempt to utilize these skills in an educationally valuable manner. Theoretically, the girls also felt that if people in the academy could actually see them and hear them speaking for and about themselves, then this would be

one step closer to shaking up the practice of speaking for girls that had been so problematic at the Montreal conference.

Numerous other issues and ideas that came up in our discussions about ways to counter the Montreal experience, such as interpretation of material and control over voice. The films limit the amount of interpretation that is required in other forms of data collection. When interviewing, the girls interact with me and answer my questions. *I* transcribe the interviews and *I* choose what parts to use according to the subject I am addressing. The use of the documentary filming as part of this research was necessary. The use of the documentary filming as part of this research became necessary as a mode of inquiry and presentation, as it allows for a multi layered level of analysis by both the researcher and the reader, while recognizing the girls as producers of their own knowledge. The films combined with other ethnographic methods provide an additional layer of data and analysis from which the girls can speak directly into the research process about their experiences with Girls' Nite.

Recognizing that one of the aspects of previous girl studies research that made me most uncomfortable was the way it presented itself in nice neat packages, the use of documentary film offers a solution to this problem. Merging video with the written word represents the fragments of rational thought, and lived bodily experience that combine and separate to create the gendered lives of these girls (Gonick, 2003, p. 15). Rather than fighting to clean these up and create a story that may be read uninterrupted from beginning to end, the documentaries bring the interruptions, inconsistencies and dead ends that make up the lives of adolescent girls, into this research as a method of disrupting the linear expectation of social research. The written word requires my

interpretation. The films allow the girls the creative freedom to be seen and heard inside the thesis, thus bringing the girls inside the academy. Bringing the films into the research as a mode of inquiry allows for the girls' words to be heard directly within the thesis.

The educational documentaries create threads of discussion that spin in multiple directions. Merging video with the written word represents the fragments of rational thought, and lived bodily experience that combine and separate to create the gendered lives of these girls (Gonick, 2003, p. 15). Rather than fighting to clean these up and create a story that may be read uninterrupted from beginning to end, the documentaries bring the interruptions, inconsistencies and dead ends that make up the lives of adolescent girls, into the research as a method of disrupting the linear expectation of social research. The written word requires my interpretation. The films allow the girls the creative freedom to be seen and heard inside the thesis.

*Generating Data, Negotiating a Place:
Returning to Westside*

Due to my status as a staff member there from 2000-2003, I was given full access to Westside High for this an unconventional research project. I stayed in touch with the school, the students, the staff and the board while on my leave and returned to collect and generate (Graue & Walsh, 1998) data 18 months after leaving my full-time position. My history with the school meant that I brought a thorough knowledge of the school and its workings before I arrived to "do" my research.

I spent just over four weeks at Westside High in April and May of 2005. I arrived two weeks before the fourth Girls' Nite sleepover and stayed for two and a half weeks

after the sleepover. My observation time in the field broaches that of participant observation. Due to my history with Girls' Nite and my contact with the girls, the school and the program while studying in Vancouver, I remained very involved in the planning of the program. My past experience with school granted me insider access to Westside High that allows this research to use the title "participant observation". This research is also informed by the contact I kept with the girls while on my academic leave. In the first year of my leave I attended a retreat in Montreal with many of the young women interviewed and I also returned to Westside for the third annual Girls' Nite Sleepover. Therefore, my research is informed by four years of history with the project as well as four weeks of participant observation in the field. However, the fact that I had been absent from the school for 1.5 years prior to doing my research on site also meant that I was not fully integrated into the staff and the school.

Upon my return, I was thrown back into my previous held role of staff advisor to Girls' Nite. Because I was not teaching classes the other staff members involved in the program instantly placed much of the responsibility for the last minute planning on me. This was a role I gladly accepted. The other staff advisors, Jill and Alison had already invested a considerable amount of time throughout the school year planning and organizing for the sleepover. I felt a sense of obligation to the program and to Alison and Jill to help them out as much as possible since I was coming back to do my research on the program. Furthermore, I was still as passionate about the program as I was during the first year it ran, I was willing to do anything to ensure its success. Therefore, for the two weeks prior to the program I facilitated the girls in running planning meetings, meeting with the principal, answering questions from parents, calling to arrange last minute

speakers and funding. It was due to my history with the school as a staff member and teacher of the girls that I was able to step into this administrative position. It was in these weeks, carrying out these tasks in which the status of “participant observation” could be affixed to this research. During this time, I was also attempting to get a handle on the feeling in school, get to know the new staff, “observe” as much as possible through attending classes and staff meetings.

I “observed” the girls in multiple locations within their school lives. As already stated I was participating in Girls’ Nite organizational events, but I also attended class with a few of the girls, strategically choosing classes with teachers that I knew either supported or resisted the program. I often met up with a group of the girls in the hallway, outside one of their lockers and sat on the floor chatting and catching up with them. Finally, there was the great social aspect of eating that brought me together with many of the girls as often as possible. My first week was full of individual and group lunches with the girls. As the newness of my being there passed, these lunches faded; however, my time with the girls did not. By the end of my second week back at the school, my constant presence with the girls combined with my constant questioning triggered Izzy to state, “Jeez Steph, not even my mom is this interested in what I have to say” (FN April 28, 2005). Izzy statement demonstrated my constant presence in the girls’ lives, reiterating to me that things couldn’t just go back to the way they were when I was working full time at Westside.

“If you are not coming back next year, then what are you doing here?” The experience of being an insider and an outsider

Returning to Westside High to do my research placed me somewhere between veteran teacher and intimidating/unwelcome researcher. On previous trips to visit the school, the staff that had always welcomed me back with warm embraces and attentive questions about my studies. Everyone on staff knew that at some point I would be coming back to collect data and, until I actually arrived to do this, they all displayed a varying level of interest in my studies. Some had even emailed me in Vancouver with issues in their practise for which they were looking for “academic” advice or resources. The majority of the staff supportive of my studies; that is, until the research mirror was turned onto them. On the first day I arrived to begin my research, I was greeted with the usual hugs and questions about when I was coming back and how my studies were progressing. As soon as I stated that I was at the school for four weeks to collect and generate data, staff that had previously been happy to see me suddenly became cold and “too busy” to socialize. As a former staff member at Westside High, I knew how we treated “researchers” that came into our school to mine it for information and write something critical about our educational practises. Returning to Westside High, I was now subject to this treatment from the very folks with whom I had once shared community.

I was not the only one confused by my multiple locations within the staff room. On my fourth day there, Martine, a new teacher who had started on staff since I had taken my leave asked me bluntly, “Okay, tell me what you are doing here again, are you coming back to teach or are you doing research?” This statement indicates the dichotomy often felt by teacher/researchers, as Bhabha (1994) writes, I was, “in-between the designations of identity” (p. 37). I could not be a teacher and a researcher; it was not

possible to be there doing research and coming back to teach. I had to be doing on or the other.

The struggle to find a place in the school may have caused me and my former colleagues some angst, but my knowledge of the school and the staff only proved beneficial to the research. The principal trusted me implicitly and I was set free in the school to do whatever I wanted to do. This trust carried forward to the new vice-principal who greeted me with so much warmth it was as if he knew me. Because the school support staff was familiar with me, I was able to get up-to-date information on the whereabouts of each of the girls. I could ask the office staff what class one of the girls was in so that I could “hang around” outside the classroom in order to track her down to ask a question, set up an interview, seek clarification on something that had been said the day before or just to check-in on the progress of her film or her studies. Finally, the school allowed unlimited access to its media equipment, including video cameras and editing equipment for the duration of my stay. This meant that every girl could have a video camera at her disposal for use within the school whenever she needed. I was given room on the school server to save the footage and allow the girls access to it for video editing. All this proved to be an invaluable connection and saved me hours of organizational time and hundreds of dollars in video equipment rental.

My status as both an insider and an outsider within this research challenges notions of objectivity and Truth in the research process. There is a belief that being an insider is biased, non-objective and therefore not neutral or True. As stated in the opening chapter, I believe that instead of being detrimental to the study or creating a risky unethical personal link to the project, my subjectivity within this study validates what is

already known: that any scholarly project is inherently an expression of elements of its researcher's life. It would be possible to get caught up in a debate about the prospect of Truth within research, however that is not what I feel is important in this particular research moment. I believe that by acknowledging our locations and subjectivities within our research, research can be more reflexive and begin to better account for multiple perspectives within research. My position as both an insider and an outsider within this research proved both beneficial and difficult at times. As those moments arise throughout this thesis, I discuss them and the processes that I went through in order to be as critical and reflexive as possible.

Methodological Procedures

The Girls' Nite Girls

As I already stated in the previous chapter, I worked with 8 young women involved in Girls' Nite for various periods of time over their secondary school years. The girls were chosen on a volunteer basis. Originally, I expected and desired to interview only the three girls who had been involved in the project from its inception, as well as Marcia, who had been involved from its second year, but had attributed incredible changes in her personality and views of the world to her involvement in Girls' Nite. However, upon my long anticipated arrival at Westside High numerous girls approached me requesting the opportunity to talk about the project. My initial reaction was to follow the advice of a former professor and keep the sample size as small as possible. Nevertheless, when I sat back and looked at the diversity in experiences amongst the young women expressing a desire to be interviewed, I decided to go ahead with at least interviewing these other young women and seeing what came out of the data. In the end,

the data generated through the addition of these young women proved richer than I imagined, illuminating the differences, similarities and contradictions among the young women involved in the Girls' Nite program (Loutzenheiser, 2002).

One example of these similarities and differences was in the way the young women in this study identified themselves in terms of their own positionality. Throughout this research I argue that identity is a fluid notion and one that needs to be seen as permeable rather than in the fixed and rigid way that it is often referred to in larger society. As already stated, the young women within this research identified in some very rigid ways at some points and in shifting ways in others. While I may believe in one theoretical model of identity, the girls utilized some very rigid terms to define themselves and it is important to acknowledge these identifications for this project. Of the eight young women in the project, five identified as white, two identified as bi-racial and one identified as eastern European. Five identified as "straight" and three identified as "questioning" or "not believing in sexual binaries", although none claimed to have anything other than heterosexual relationships "so far in life" but "were open to whatever and whoever might cross my path". I feel it is important to note that many of the girls who identified as "straight" also made statements such as, "whatever that is" or "right now I like guys" or "on the scale, I am definitely on the straight side".

The girls' socio-economic class also varied greatly. Two of the girls identified as coming from wealthy families and recognized their class privilege, four identified as middle class and two identified as lower class or "struggling". The girls varied in their levels of academic success. Some of the girls struggled to attain the grades necessary to get them to university, while others did not have to work as hard. Finally, many of the

girls were not involved in any other aspect of school life other than the Girls' Nite program, however two played on school sports teams and one was involved in the school movie as a director.

The Interviews

I conducted at least one "formal" open ended interview with each of these young women and a second interview with two of the young women. The second interview stemmed out of my desire to seek clarification on some of the points made by these two girls during their interviews. Though I came to each interview with a thorough list of questions, my goal was to be responsive to the energies, insights and stories that may emerge in the moment. "Intrinsic in story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations"(Tuhiwai-Smith, 2001). I posed open-ended questions to elicit responses that were organic and free-flowing to ensure that each of the girls had the opportunity to take the questions in their own direction and had the freedom to articulate what they considered to be the most important and meaningful issues and answers. Following the advice of Tuhiwai Smith, active listening techniques were employed during these interviews to ensure opportunities for dialogue and conversation. Yet, I also tried to keep a certain amount of focus to our interviews, thinking of the overall goals and gradually returning to the interview questions when it felt right to do so. My intention was not to provide comprehensive histories of each girl's involvement in Girls' Nite; rather I shaped my questions to focus on how the girls felt their experiences in secondary school have been different or influenced by their involvement with Girls' Nite, as well as how they felt that Girls' Nite influenced their own everyday existence.

At particular times during our interviews, my previous experience at the school as a teacher, as well as my knowledge of the school culture proved beneficial. The interviews flowed smoothly through the girls' recounting particularly poignant personal memories or the naming of certain students and staff members that had given us problems in the past because I shared the experience of dealing with these particular staff and students in the past. Also, due to our shared struggle, the girls knew they could trust me with the information. I was also able to rely on my past knowledge of the school dynamics in order to probe the girls during the interviews. Finally, due to my past experience with the school and the girls I was able to better contextualize the girls' statements and move the interview to a deeper level. For example, when the girls made references such as, "You know, the Tom like teachers" I understood that "Tom" was the teacher that put up the most outspoken resistance to Girls' Nite and that in this statement the girls were referring to staff resistance. The girls were also more forthcoming with me than they may have been with a stranger researcher.

During our interviews, some girls shared intimate details of their lives, such as dealing with abortion and dealing with disordered eating in reference to how Girls' Nite had influenced their high school years. The girls knew that I was aware and familiar with these experiences in their lives. As their teacher and advisor to Girls' Nite, I had helped many of them locate resources to deal with their disordered eating or helped them to seek out family planning counselling. I believe that these past experiences gave me an historical window into the girls' lives, making them feel more comfortable to share these significant stories and their connection to Girls' Nite.

At times, my insider status also proved difficult to manage at times. I had to be careful not to make assumptions in my interviews and ensure that my thoughts about what the girls were referring to were correct. For example, during my initial interview with Rosa, she made reference to a previous conflict she had had with a female staff member at the school. I had helped to mediate the conflict between Rosa and this particular staff member, therefore, I did not ask too many questions about the incident. It was while listening to the interview on the way home that day that I realised that I needed to seek clarification on some of the points that Rosa had made about that specific incident. Rosa is one of the girls with whom I conducted a second interview. Adding to the difficulties of my insider status was the possibility of my viewing the program through the lens of my fond memories and opinions about the positive contributions Girls' Nite had made to school life. This particular difficulty was mediated by Jill who was feeling particularly negative about the program during my visit. Jill had been dealing with numerous personal conflicts amongst and between the organizing girls of the program. Unfortunately, I was across the country reading academic articles about identity and power while Jill was at Westside living the theory amid these conflicts between the girls. Jill was adamant that I not write a romanticised case study of the program that glossed over these power struggles and therefore constantly questioned and challenged my emerging opinions about the event.

In an effort to ensure complete participation from the girls, I kept them involved in the interview process well after the actual interviews were completed. Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed them into type written form, and then sent these transcriptions to the participants for review. All of the participants provided

feedback on their interview transcripts. The process of analysing the transcripts will be discussed in further detail in another section. At this stage, most of the feedback I received involved minor corrections on wording as well as a few clarifications on the meanings behind certain responses and quotes¹².

All the interviews, except for one, were conducted in the same location within the school. I was required by the school board ethics committee to interview the girls on school property, during school hours without interrupting class schedules. This meant that the interviews had to take place on the girls' lunch or during a spare period in their class schedule. The enthusiasm to share their experiences with Girls' Nite was overwhelming and surprising. The girls were more than willing to give up their lunches and a few of them even arrived at 8:30 in the morning, giant coffees in hand because their study block was during first period. Their interest in this research project constantly inspired me and just when I was ready to throw the towel in for the one hundredth reason or roadblock, one or two of the girls would come bounding towards me with more information they wanted to share about the project.

I also interviewed the two other staff members involved with the project. My interviews with the staff members of the school focussed on the operational side of the program, looking at issues within the school that have arisen, including how the program has influenced the school community, problems that have arisen out of the program and what these staff members would do differently if they have the opportunity to start the

¹² It is important to note there was not a finite point in the research process where I ceased collecting data, and then began writing. Because I am in contact with many of the girls on a regular basis, I continued to "collect data" throughout the writing process. They send me "social" emails, updating me on graduation, university life etc. Often there are interesting tidbits of information that are integral to the various themes discussed in this work. Occasionally one of the girls will send me an email that I have begun to call the "I was thinking" emails. In these emails the girls have been reflecting on the Girls' Nite program and the research project and had some thought or idea that they feel they want to share with me. The process of data collection never had a finite ending point (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1990 for further discussion).

program in other locations. Although the project focussed on working from the perspective of the girls involved, I was interested in the responses of the staff as an intrinsic part of learning how Girls' Nite has impacted the school community. I had planned to interview the school principal, however she was too busy to find the one hour time allocation needed for an interview.

The Films: "We filled the school server with feminist film footage!!"

Simultaneous to conducting the interviews, four girls in the project created short documentaries to explore the research question through their own lens. Westside High has a flourishing film studies class and as such is set up to accommodate the process of documentary film making. Originally all the girls expressed an interest in making films for the project, however due to various time constraints with personal schedules, only four girls ended up completing films. The girls who decided to make films were each assigned a video camera and provided with tapes to collect footage. At the end of each day we would meet to download the footage they had collected onto the school server. Once the footage was on the server the girls were able to utilize various film editing programs to edit and make their movies. The skill level in movie making varied for each of the girls involved. Two of the girls were accomplished at using both the video cameras and the editing equipment and required no assistance in this process. One of the girls was taking the documentary film class and had beginning knowledge of filming and editing. The fourth girl had next to no experience and required training throughout the various processes of the film making from how to use the camera to how to edit and use the computer software.

The filming process proved to be simultaneously frustrating and exhilarating as we negotiated the hurdles that accompanied doing the type of research for the first time. For example, there was one day where we had all agreed to meet to edit footage together, but the teacher whose classroom we were going to use forgot to show up, leaving us all outside the classroom itching to be on the other side of the door. Instead of viewing this as a missed opportunity, Sarah, who had the most film making experience, suggested that we go to another classroom and “storyboard” our ideas so that when we did finally get access to the computers we could get started with the editing straight away. On this particular day, Sarah spent an hour talking to other girls about the storyboard process and the importance it plays in creating a finished film product. After this session, Rosa exclaimed, “I am learning more here than in the film class, this is so great.” This statement exemplified our goal that this project be one that was beneficial and knowledge building for the girls as well as for the academy. I felt good about this process after this day.

On another occasion the girls and I realized the potential of the films to be disruptive to more than just the academy. On this particular day we were uploading footage onto the school server for editing purposes. We were abruptly halted by the “Tech Team” of the school, including the “teacher head” of this team, because we had “used up all the free space on the school server”. In this moment the girls and I must have all looked at the “Tech Team” with a confused look which expressed our ignorance to what exactly the implications were to this news. The student members of the team began to inform us, in a very panicked and hurried tone that as long as our film footage took up this huge amount of space on the school server, no other person in the school

community could save anything to the server, not assignments or tests or school memos. I had a moment of mortification which was quickly interrupted by the girls cheering and clapping. I looked around to see them dancing with joy about the fact that they had filled the school server with “feminist film footage”. As we all laughed, Izzy initiated a high five in excitement. The tech team interrupted our celebration informing us that “this was not something to laugh about.” The “tech team” did not share in our moment of disruption and demanded that we free up space on the server immediately. Sarah came up with the solution of loading the footage onto an external hard drive. As the director of the school movie, she knew that the film department had some external hard drives and also knew which ones had space for our footage. We were fortunate that the film teacher was so supportive of this project, without her guidance, equipment, time and patience I am not sure that we would have been able to logistically pull off this method of inquiry.

I left Westside High with four videos containing four very different perspectives on the research question. My thoughts regarding the films adding an additional layer of data proved true when I reviewed the films and compared them to the interview transcripts of each girl. The films contained a number of issues and thoughts that did not come out in the girls’ interviews but were apparent in their films. This was most apparent with Rosa’s movie. Rosa and I maintained close contact during the time I was away from the school. During the eighteen months that I had been away from Westside High Rosa had expressed eloquent and profound ideas regarding Girls’ Nite and the impact that she thought it had on both herself and the school community. Her eloquent correspondence with me during this period was one of the reasons that I decided to research Girls’ Nite. However, when we sat down in the “formal” interview setting, no

matter how informal and relaxed I attempted to make the setting and atmosphere, Rosa shut down. Her interview transcript is laden with “I don’t know” and “I haven’t thought about that”. Her film, however, is full of interesting ideas and deep introspection about why she feels Girls’ Nite is such an important event. Adding another layer to this is the fact that Rosa was the student with the least amount of filming experience, yet she felt much more comfortable expressing her ideas in this format than in the traditional interview setting. Upon screening all the films and seeing the wide variety of data and ideas that came out of them, both myself and the girls felt relieved and proud of the process that we had undertaken to ensure their voices were heard within this research.

The use of autobiographical documentary film created the conditions for a record of thinking that is representative of the lived experience of a girl’s life, that is, of course, never fully known or representable. Therefore, such an ethnographic site reorders thought on the relation of writing knowledge and of writing experience. Simply put, it disorders written research, drawing it together and then apart with the girls’ interpretations of their own lives. In doing so, the films will be creating unexpected and sometimes troubling moments of contact and separation (Gonick, p.8). In these moments of contact and separation, readers will be connecting with the girls on a level unattainable through the use of the written word only. This connection will prompt researchers to remember that girls’ experiences with their bodies move beyond the written word, thus representing the multiple perspectives of girls’ experiences.

Data Analysis: “Co-constructions at the hyphen” (Fine, 1994, p.71)

Despite denials, qualitative researchers are always implicated in the (Self-Other) hyphen. When we opt, as has been the tradition, simply to write about those who have been Othered, we deny the hyphen.

Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, personal logic theorizing and decontextualization, we inscribe the Other, strain to white out Self and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts. (Fine, 1994, p. 72)

While there are numerous examples of critiquing our positionality against and with our participants as authors within the academic realm (Ellsworth, 1989, Lather, 1991, Fine, 1994), as well as critiquing the methods used to collect data (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994), the ways researchers analyze data and come to write our representations is not elucidated in our projects as often or as completely as it should be. Perhaps this is because much of the data analysis is an instinctual and iterative process that begins as the data collection begins and continues through the coding and into the writing. However, in working with the young women within this project, an organic process of data analysis emerged between myself and four of the participants. As I began the process of data analysis, Sarah, Marcia, Rachel and Amber all expressed interest and suggestions regarding the concepts I was expressing regarding their interviews. In an attempt to continue to disrupt notions of power and researcher, through my own examination of the hyphen (Fine, 1994), we (Marcia, Sarah, Rachel, Amber and myself) began an organic, spontaneous process of group analysis.

While we may have come up with a way to disrupt issues of power in the data collection stage of the research, the process of analysing the data demonstrating that issues of power do not end once the data collection is completed. During the interviews and within the films, the girls were able to construct and create their own stories. However, once I left with school with all these stories, it seemed that I was free to construct whatever stories *I* chose out of the stories the girls had given me. Ultimately there is another shift in control which

reveals the potential for appropriate hiding under the comforting rationale of empowerment. Although narrators are occasionally consulted prior to publication, and at times even share in some of the material benefits of publication, the scholar/interviewer typically returns to her life and her scholarly enterprise, having transformed women's words into various written forms, but also having walked away – usually for good – from the situation that led her to her subject in the first place. (Patai, 1991, p. 3)

Thankfully, the young women within this project would not allow me to “walk away” from them once the data had been gathered for this project. Some, not all of them, were too curious and too informed to allow their words to appear on these pages in any way other than ways they agreed with and understood. Through the act of analysing and representing, I had the power to categorize and contextualize the girls' lives. As I began to undertake the process of data analysis, the power that lay in my hands seemed to run counter to my purpose of creating the films as a method of inquiry. The power that I had to categorize and contextualize the girls can be viewed as an act of objectification which could easily lead to conflict between myself and the girls (Denzin, 1994). It is during this process that I, as the researcher, could pick and choose the pieces of “data” that would act as “evidence” for arguments and points within the thesis. This process of decontextualizing is what the girls and I hoped to counter with the inclusion of their words and voices in the research through the use of documentary film.

It felt to me like I had all the power at this point to shape the interviews and data into stories that fit into the particular research moment. Through a series of emails to the girls in the project, I introduced the possibility of analysing the data together. Marcia, Rachel, Sarah and Amber all expressed an interest in this possibility and it was with these four girls that I set out to represent their lives and words as fully as possible. I was attempting to be as accountable to the girls as possible through this process. The desire

to have this research represent the girls' lives and words as fully as possible had two major implications for the data analysis process within this research. One was with the interview transcripts and the other was with the way the films would be utilized within the final research piece.

During the process of coding the interviews (accomplished both by hand and using qualitative research software) and writing, as I looked and re-looked at the themes that were emerging from the data, I would talk with the four girls involved in this process about the themes I was seeing, seeking their ideas and opinions regarding the patterns. For Sarah, Rachel, Marcia, Amber and myself this process ignited fiery discussions regarding theory and theoretical applications to lived experiences. In this process I felt as though I was heeding Fine's (1994) advice to avoid the possibility of "individualism, personalogic theorizing and decontextualization" (p. 72). Since I was not located in the same city as the girls at the time these conversations were occurring, they often happened in two formats, either over the phone using a conference call arrangement or over email, utilizing the "reply-all" button. For the girls who chose not to participate in this process, I maintained "analysis logs". These logs, resembling a daily journal, recorded my daily analysis process so that if any of the girls decided they wanted to participate at a later time, than I could go back and re-examine my process in order to be accountable to the girls. So far, of the girls who chose not to participate in this process, none have changed their minds. I have had two emails from Rosa and one from Melody stating that they have heard about the process from other girls in the project and it sounded, "neat" or "interesting", but that it still doesn't appeal to them.

The films proved to be the biggest analytical struggle for me and the girls and in fact, I am still struggling with how to include them into the research in a meaningful manner. The original intention with the films was to create an interactive paper, including links to parts of the girls' films that proved points or illuminated certain tensions being discussed. However, as Sarah, Rachel, Marcia, Amber and myself moved through this process of discussing data analysis and the possibility of objectification, the thought of cutting up the films seemed to fall right into the trap of objectification that hooks (1990) talks about in the introductory quote of this chapter. Further, cutting up the films also ran counter to the purpose of their inclusion in the data collection process. If I was going to cut up the films, the same way we cut up the interview transcripts, then, once again, the researcher would be deciding what voices you would hear and see and why. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the complexity and completeness of the girls' ideas and voices, we decided to leave the films in their entirety. Therefore, as a reader of this research you have be asked to watch all four films before reading the thesis in its entirety. This is a large request, as the four films run approximately thirty minutes in total. However, the time and effort that the girls used to create these films pales in comparison, and for this reason we are hoping that the readers will entertain this request. Then throughout the thesis, during the analysis sections when I, as the author and researcher, want to refer to a part of a film or a theme within a film, I will simply refer back to that film in the paper. This will also allow the reader to challenge my findings and notions regarding the girls' ideas and films in a way that they can not do with partial transcript pieces. Through watching each girl's film in its entirety the reader will see the

originality and individuality of each of the girls who participated in the film making process.

Narrative Inquiry as a Framework for Writing

One of the many dilemmas I faced in producing this final written account of my research journey and findings, was to find a form of writing which had a resonance with the experience of the research itself. As the research began to unfold I turned intuitively to a story-telling form in writing as a way of both representing my research experiences and also communicating the past experiences of the Girls' Nite program into a "research text". This form of writing paid tribute to the way that my own personal experience with the girls and the program was wrapped up in the words and images the girls chose to use in their interviews and films. My choice about the use of story form is an attempt to represent, rather than hide, my experience with the Girls' Nite program. Narrative Inquiry is a framework that is grounded in the wider theoretical perspective of story telling. As a result, narrative is used throughout this thesis as a method of inquiry and communication in order to account for the way my personal position is embroidered onto this research. The model I use is taken largely from that developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994). Clandinin and Connelly start from the basis that social sciences are founded on the study of experience and therefore experience is the starting point and key term for all social science inquiry. For this particular research project, the assertion that the research is founded on experience describes perfectly the way this research unfolded. The authors propose narrative and story telling as a mode of inquiry which places the author as centrally involved in the study of experience. Clandinin and Connelly's standpoint is that story is neither raw sensation, nor cultural form, it is both and neither.

For them, experience is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones. These elements interact reflexively with each other. The study of experience is the study of life, for example in this research, the study of the girls' experience was also the study of my own life as lived with the girls at that particular time.

Throughout this research I will be telling the story of my search for the key questions I wish to ask, of my search for theory and methodologies to carry these questions, and of my developing awareness of different ways of 'knowing' about experience. As I began the research, I became aware of many past experiences I was carrying with me which influenced the questions I was asking as well as my day to day practice. In Clandinin and Connelly's terms, these were the stories I was living as a researcher in entering the research process. I also carried hopes, visions and aspirations for the future of this research, which were shaped by the stories I had lived in the past. My personal experience of engaging with the research was one of becoming more highly aware of the theoretical and value assumptions I was carrying and how these might affect the research process. Writing about these experiences in storied form facilitated my growing awareness and helped to shape how my personal experiences were permeating the research story.

This focus on personal process constituted an inward looking dimension to the research, one which was facilitated by writing about my experiences in the field in storied form as I went along. This writing was a means of making explicit to myself my own personal processes as a researcher and how they informed and were informed by the research process. In turn they also became a means of communicating to others the

unfolding research process. Finally, the research process led to experiences of painful confusion and challenge, and eventually transition and growth. Throughout this research you will be reading various accounts of the participants within this research. You will see quotes from the young women and from the other teachers involved in the story. However, due to my personal involvement with the Girls' Nite program, it became impossible for me to tease apart my own memories and experiences from those of the girls. Therefore as you read, you will also be reading my own memories and my own accounts. Sometimes the line between data and memory becomes blurred, however as Clandinin and Connelly remind us, no matter who we are, the stories we have lived as researcher are always influencing what we are writing as researchers.

Chapter Three

“I DIDN’T FEEL POWERFUL, BUT NOW I FEEL POWERFUL”: RE-ENVISIONING THE MATRIX

Everyone knows what a school is. One of the most difficult tasks in social research is to take a situation that everyone thinks they understand and illuminate it in new ways. (Connell. 2002, p. 12)

Come on Izzy, let’s go transform this space.
(Eve, Girls’ Nite Video, November 2004)

Within the research data the theme of power continually appeared in discussions with various members of the Westside High community, including the girls, teachers, administrators, staff and students. In these discussions, the power that people were referring to was not in relation to the researcher or in defence of research participants. Rather, in these discussions people were concerned with the way the traditional and previously unchallenged power structures at the school were disrupted with the establishment of the Girls’ Nite program. One of the most significant effects of the Girls’ Nite program on the gendered identity formation of the Girls Nite girls was the way that access to power was illuminated for the girls through the various planned and unplanned aspects of the programming. This led the girls to understand that power was not positional or fixed and therefore unattainable to them based on their location as girls. Rather, through the events of the Girls’ Nite program, the young women involved in this research began to see that not only were they targets of power, they were also elements of its articulation and therefore able to be vehicles of its application (Foucault, 1980). This realization became clearer to them after they began to understand that much of gender identity is based on a repetitive performance which is culturally mediated (Butler, 1993). Working with these two realizations, the young women began to re-envision and transform how they accessed and embodied power within the school. For the school

community and for the girls in the study, this claiming of space and power proved to be the most controversial and transformative aspect of the Girls' Nite program.

This chapter examines the ways in which the process and activities of Girls' Nite allowed the young women to begin to recontextualize and redefine issues of gender and power in such disruptive and, therefore, transformative ways. These disruptions were not always clean and tidy models of empowerment. This process was complicated and messy and proved to be more difficult for some girls than for others. I will examine how this process proved particularly uncomfortable for two girls within this study, as well as demonstrate some of the other difficulties that other study participants encountered as they embarked on this process. I also look at the conditions necessary and the actions undertaken by the young women that caused such a shift in the way they embodied power within the walls of Westside High. Finally, I examine the impact that this shift in power had on the school, the girls, and the traditional power holders at the school, which brought to light the complex web of accommodation and resistance that girls undertake on a regular basis in schools today. I will utilize Foucault's theories about power and surveillance together with Butler's theory of performativity to explain how the girls disrupted and transformed power structures at Westside High.

Girlpower does not always mean girls have power

As was stated in the introductory chapter, thanks to the emergence of the term "girl power" and all things pink in the market place, it seems difficult to argue that girls do not have access to some kind of power in today's society. Despite the materialization of all things girl in recent years, very little has been written about young women, power, and schools. What has been written, more often than not, views young women as victims

of an un-gender friendly school system that further marginalizes girls (AAUW, 2001; Sadker & Sadker, 1993; Gaskell, 1992). Exceptions to this include Arnot (2002), Harris (2001, 2003, 2004) and Davies (1993, 2002) however, even these authors stop short of examining the influence that gained access to power has on young women in schools and on the influence that these young women then have on the schools themselves. Kenway et al. (1997a) is the single example that I found that attempts to address the way re-envisioning power can influence young women in schools. The view of power that best fit the way that power played itself out through the girls and the Girls' Nite program is found with Foucault. While gender is given a fairly low priority by Foucault, his accounts of power allowed for a definition that was multiple, distributed and subject to resistance:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (1980, p. 98)

Also important in this discussion on power is the process that led the girls to recognizing that power was not localised. This is a particularly important detail because it led to a shift in the way the girls envisioned power. Until this point the girls had held the view that was power positional or localised, something to be acquired through particular actions or accomplishments, such as discussed by Foucault in the above quote. But through the process to be discussed in this chapter, the girls began to feel powerful in ways that had previously been unfamiliar to them. This shift in the way power was embodied happened as the girls became more aware of the implications of gender

performance. As the girls began to recognize and understand gender performativity, they also realized that these performances directly influence the way power relations are structured. This led me to Butler's recognition of the influence of gender on power. Butler (1993) argues that "There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (p. 9). She (1992) also suggests that

if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and time again. (p. 13)

Butler's notion about power and subjectivity helps explain the way the girls began to understand that any power they gained through gender performance still left them vulnerable to rejection from those who set the standards by which the girls were judged.

Izzy notes this best when explaining why Girls' Nite came to be:

We realised there was this really unhealthy competition between the girls. Girls were competing for guys' attention, but guys only paid attention to the girls that looked like Britney (Spears) or Christina (Aguilera). This meant that the girls were competing to be Britney or Christina and that was never going to be possible for any of us.

Izzy's quote exemplifies Butler's (1992) notion about power being constituted and produced time and time again. In this particular example the girls were always at the mercy of the boys in order to gain power. When they realized that gender performance was wrapped up in power relations, the girls began to shift the way they performed their gender in order to feel powerful in different ways.

When read in tandem both Butler and Foucault prove useful in this research because both of these authors articulate the way power is constituted through actions. Butler's assertion that power is constituted and reconstituted through actions allows the girls space to disorder power through a disruption of the actions that constitute that power. Simultaneously, Foucault's recognition that power plays itself out in various,

complex and multidirectional ways allows us to validate as powerful the ways the girls disrupted traditional power structures and to recognize these as valid articulations of power within a school community. For example, Melody often enacted and embodied her newfound power in ways that made staff members, and even myself, uncomfortable at times, like the time I talked about at the beginning of the thesis when Melody was yelling at other students in a way that made her feel powerful and me feel uncomfortable. Another example, which will be discussed at length within this chapter, is the way the young women organized counter-resistances to the backlash they faced from the young men in the school when they began to organize Girls' Nite. Reading this through the works of Foucault and Butler offers opportunities to challenge the notion that power is only located within position (such as staff over students, male over female, etc). When combined, these two definitions of power and gender give the female students at Westside High the chance to challenge, disrupt and transform how they play out their gendered identity, leading to greater access to power within the school walls.

Attempting to understand and articulate the complex web of power within the Girls' Nite program is a difficult and often complicated task. It is not linear, not neat and proved to be one of the most highly contentious issues within the study. However, it is within all this messiness that the true potential of Girls' Nite to work as transformative programming lies.

“Pillow fighting pornfest”: Recognizing the limits and expectations of gender

The emergence of resistance to the organizing of Girls' Nite was felt on many levels and caused numerous complex responses from the young women organizing the event. The resistance that was felt as a result of Girls' Nite, along with the counter-

resistance organized by the girls again brings us to Foucault for an understanding of how power resides in multiple locations. The way that the girls responded to the resistance they experienced illuminated for them the power that they have to affect other positions of power in the school. The way that power operates in dialectical relation with resistance was illuminated for the girls through the experience of Girls Nite. Foucault states:

Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence, there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of Great Revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. (p. 95-96)

This means that power is everywhere and so is resistance. There are numerous points at which power can be challenged, and the way that resistance and counter-resistances played themselves out at Westside High as a result of Girls' Nite illuminate the multiplicity of power and resistance.

For the young women of Girls' Nite the most significant result of resistance to the program was awareness about the presence of sedimented gender domination and the limits this has on young women's choices and actions. It is important to remember that the girls did not set out to address issues of sexism within the walls of the school at the first event. The original intention of the program was to create a community amongst the young women of the school who were suffering from depression. However, the unexpected and high level of resistance that the girls faced helped shape the program into the one we see today. The way that the girls responded to this resistance, through the building of a counter resistance of their own, was one of the incidents that led the girls to recognize their potential to transform gender relations within the walls of Westside High.

Staff Resistance: Pet projects and school bullies

As was stated in the introduction, Westside High is a small school of 525 students with a staff of 27. For many, this invokes an image of collegiality and mutual support; however this is not always the case. As previously mentioned there are a number of progressive and radical programs being run at Westside High, which are, more often than not, run by the same small group of progressive and/or radical teachers. Due to the fiercely vocal controversy that erupted over the notion of a “female only” event at Westside, teachers who normally do not discuss or acknowledge the political nature of teaching were forced to foster discussions in their classrooms about gender discrimination. The response from most teachers on staff was supportive and open. Most teachers were willing to moderate these discussions in their classrooms. A handful of teachers responded to questions put to them by students by telling them to ask “Stephanie or Jill, they are running the event”. Still, even a smaller number of teachers responded by joining in on the discriminatory discussions by questioning the politics of Jill and myself with statements such as, “Well, look who is running the event, they don’t call themselves feminists for nothing you know”. In response to questions from students about what girls might do at Girls’ Nite, two teachers responded with “Paint their toenails and have pillow fights. What else would a bunch of girls do together?” and “Talk about boys, what else would they do?” Also, these same teachers would not discourage or admonish inappropriate questions from the boys in the class that were directed at the organizing girls. During a classroom visit made by Melody and Izzy, a male student remarked, “Are you going to dyke it out at Girls’ Nite? If you are, what do I have to do so that I can come and watch?” When Izzy looked to the classroom teacher for help in dealing with

the comment, the teacher responded with, "Don't look at me, you are the ones running the event. Answer the man's question." Melody responded by telling the male student that he was a "pig". The classroom teacher sent Melody to the vice-principal's office and demanded that she make a public apology to the student in front of the class. Through negotiation with the vice-principal, me, the teacher and Melody, we were able to avoid this scenario as well as point out to the classroom teacher that his action in the classroom also "bordered" on inappropriate. These openly resistant teachers demonstrated another level of subjectivity faced by the young women at Westside High. In their attempts to rebuff Girls' Nite, these teachers laid out appropriate and expected behaviour for a normal girl. Anything that Girls' Nite attempted to do that was outside this pillow fighting pajama party display of femininity was deemed to be unknown and therefore unwanted, further regulating female behaviour.

Other displays of resistance from staff were less obvious but also difficult to understand and deal with. The principal, who had initially been supportive of the idea, began to put up institutional road blocks under the guise of "board requirements" and "personal responsibility for student safety." It seemed to us that the principal was happy to support the event until controversy and debate erupted, and then she became reticent to support the event. For example, when we first ran the idea of an all-girls sleepover by the principal, she thought it was a wonderful idea. When planning began, she told us we would need male staff to act as security guards because the girls would be at risk otherwise. We were required to pay \$1100 for the caretaker that the board required be onsite if they were going to give us a permit. The school had been given a certain number of "free passes" for situations such as this, in which the board had allocated

money for overnight caretaker support. Other school events, such as open houses and sporting clinics had been granted use of one of these passes. At the time of planning Girls' Nite, there was still two passes that could be allocated for that year. The principal refused to distribute one of these passes to the Girls' Nite sleepover, forcing us to pay the caretaker's salary for the time they were in the school. We overcame the security guard request by pointing out that the necessity of male security guards ran counter to the purpose of the event. We told her that we simply would not run the event if this was going to be a requirement because it would send absolutely the wrong message to both the male and female population of the school. Eventually, after other male staff also talked to the principal about this flawed request, she conceded this demand. In an effort to compromise, Jill and I agreed to pay for the permit, allowing the school to retain the remaining two "free passes." Unfortunately for this research, despite numerous scheduled times to conduct an interview, the principal at Westside High could never find the time to talk about Girls' Nite. My reasoning for the shift in initial support due to the controversy that surrounded the event are base solely on my own observations made during the planning stages of the event.

Staff resistance also manifested itself in more indirect ways. For example, many staff were silent about the resistance and would express their discomfort with girls organizing through actions such as walking past vandalized posters, ignoring comments in class, and ignoring emails requesting help with supervision. This silence, especially in relation to the homophobic and misogynist comments made at the organizing committee and on the posters made these teachers complicit in ensuring the continuation of symbolic domination within the walls of Westside High. A few staff members expressed concern

over funding for the event and asked both Jill and I on more than one occasion if the event was receiving any kind of school or board funding. When I assured one particularly persistent staff member that the girls were doing all of the fund raising themselves, the response given was, "I just wanted to make sure that your pet projects weren't taking away from other programs that involve all the students in the school." Finally, when the backlash erupted many teachers who had agreed to supervise changed their minds and stated that they did not know that they were getting involved in such a "feminist" event and they would prefer to keep themselves out of such a political event.

Perhaps surprisingly, the easiest type of resistance to deal with was the staff who were open about their discomfort with the program. Connell (2005) refers to these staff as 'gatekeepers of patriarchy' (p.1802). These are the staff whose power is heavily invested in the patriarchal system and who have the most to lose by a shift in this system. Both Jill and I felt comfortable with this level and kind of objection; we felt that with these staff members we could address these objections honestly and openly, and we at least knew where they stood in terms of their objection or support. The less overt resistance, such as questions about funding hidden behind a veil of concern for "all students" or the disregard shown for vandalized posters, were more difficult to deal with. Many of these teachers thought that providing girls with a single sex-space meant that we were not properly preparing them for the "real world" where they were going to have "earn" their positions. These teachers would mask their objection in the language of equality, making it hard for Jill and I to counter their arguments. The various levels of resistance shown by teachers exemplified the complexity of attempting gender reform within the space of schooling.

“What about a boys’ night?”: “Equality” unveiled

While the staff resistance was tough for the girls to understand, the most visible and open resistance came from an outspoken portion of the male student population. Calls for a “Boys’ Night” and questions such as “What about the guys?” began to dominate hallway discussion. Posters that were put up to advertise the event were torn down or vandalised with various insulting, misogynist, and homophobic statements such as, “Pillow Fighting Pornfest” or “Lesbian Pornfest”. When the young women from the organizing committee went into classrooms to inform students about the event, some boys would jeer and cat call the young women. Along with the question about the possibility of the girls “dyking it out”, the young women faced questions from the boys such as, “What are you gonna do at Girls’ Nite, like paint your toenails and have pillow fights and stuff?” Sometimes staff would admonish the young men, sometimes they would not. Very early on in the process the young women noticed that the resisting students learned which teacher would allow them to speak up or out and which ones would not. In this way the girls were able to connect student resistance with staff resistance or acquiescence. Not surprisingly, the classrooms that generated the most vocal resistance from students belonged to the same teachers who had publicly admonished the efforts of Girls’ Nite. The objecting male students knew what they could get away with from whom, and this further implicates those particular teachers in producing and reproducing the sedimented gender domination that became so visible through Girls’ Nite. The girls quickly picked up on which teachers’ classrooms to avoid and which ones they could have open dialogue in regarding the event.

During their interviews the three girls who were part of organizing the first Girls' Nite only recalled the outward resistance coming from the male students at the school. Each of the three young women who had been involved with the program from the beginning had stories about this part of the Girls' Nite, planning and for two of them it was described as "the most difficult part of Girls' Nite." When I pressed Rosa about the possibility that some female students were resistant to the first Girls' Nite she noted:

There may have been girls who didn't want to come or didn't think they needed to come to the event. But when I went into classrooms, the only people that were so mean about it and made me feel shitty about what we were trying to do were guys. If it came from certain guys, like Kyle or John (two particularly loud and misogynistic boys at the school) then it was easy to laugh off, but when some of the really good guys would question it, it really hurt, it pissed me off, it made me realize what they expected of me and made me dig my heels in even more. I mean it was okay for me to joke that I was stupid, but it wasn't okay for them to think I was.

In meetings to discuss the vandalised posters and uncomfortable and embarrassing comments made during classroom visits, the young women expressed annoyance more than anger at the response to Girls' Nite. In these meetings, the young women identified the importance that the male population had in making or breaking the event. This recognition led to a light bulb moment for the girls in terms of the power the male population held over the female population in the school and began to illuminate the hidden culture of gender domination that existed at Westside High. This topic would become a central point of discussion during other planning meetings and during the sleepover itself.

The members of the planning committee were all girls who were struggling with various forms of depression and the original intent of the event was to address an issue that was very personal to each girl. The idea of organizing something to support and help them deal with their struggles had given the girls a momentary sense of agency in

controlling aspects of their own healing. With this in mind, the young women were deeply affected by the backlash. Because of their personal struggles with the issues that Girls' Nite was attempting to address, the resistance they had to deal with was viewed as a personal affront by many of the girls. Izzy was the second girl of the three originals to identify aspects of the backlash to Girls' Nite as one of the most difficult parts of the program to deal with. In her interview Izzy remembered that

I think the first one was the most difficult. It had never been done before and it was a new thing and we were trying to bring it out and we got a lot of negative comments, negative thoughts about it.

SH: Like what kind of negative comments?

The whole, "pillow fights in your underwear", "lesbian pornfest." The whole, "They are not going to talk about real issues. They are just going to paint their toenails and do their hair."

SH: How did that make you feel?

It was like, "FUCK YOU." It drove me nuts. It was so completely against what we were trying to do. We were trying to do something unique to the school and they just kept throwing it back into some stereotypical category of what girls should do if they are together in a room, which is to prettify themselves, make themselves prettier. It was like they were scared of what might happen or something.

Izzy demonstrates a realization about the role that gendered expectations played in lives of girls. This brings to mind Harris' (2003) arguments regarding the limitations of the girlpower movement on the choices girls have for expressing themselves. As long as the girls were doing something that fit within the narrow definitions of girlhood available to them, then the boys, the school, and society at large would support them. However, when they stepped outside of those narrow boundaries, then repercussions would be felt.

The presence of these narrow definitions was also noted by Rachel, who joined Girls' Nite in her last year of high school. She states:

The pressure from peers is the most powerful part of socializing in school. Before Girls' Nite I just had to accept that my *friends* would talk about me behind my back, it became normal and I did it too, because it was normal. As a teenager, you really want to be known for something, but what you can be known for is so limited, there is this really narrow gap of approval.

Rachel was not talking about the resistance that Girls' Nite felt in its first year because she was not a part of the program at the time. However, her statement illustrates the power of peer groups to decide what is in and what is out when it comes to acceptable behaviour and expression in school. For Izzy, the negative reaction and lack of encouragement that she felt while planning the first Girls' Nite ignited an anger in her that forced her to begin to recognize the "narrow gap of approval" that she had to work within as a girl in school.

The backlash also illuminated other ways that regulation and surveillance were present in the lives of young women and the influence this had on their actions. Referring to Jeremy Bentham's architectural figure of prison surveillance, Foucault (1977) calls this regulation and surveillance "Panopticism" or "the Gaze". The Panopticon is a large round building with a watch tower in the center of the building, allowing the guards to see the inmates at all times. The inmates can not see the guards and do not know when they are being watched. The major effect of the Panopticon is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...He who is subjected to the field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principal of his own subjection" (pp. 200-202). In other words, Foucault describes how the known but unseen gaze can be used as an instrument of discipline for those to whom it is directed. This is the self surveillance that the girls were beginning to acknowledge for the first time. For

many of the young women of the organizing committee, this was the first time they became aware of the presence and impact of sexism on and in their lives. Rosa explains this realization:

I remember that feeling when we first started Girls' Nite and all the guys freaked out about a "Guys' Nite" and all that shit. It was such a lightbulb moment for me. Like they were so pissed that we actually wanted to DO something that might be good for us. Before that they would be all, "there is no more sexism, girls are equal" and then the minute we wanted to do something that might actually prove that or even just the thought of doing something without them, they were scared we were going to talk about them, like that was all we had to do. It made me start to think about where else they had an influence that maybe I hadn't thought about and I started to think about what happens in the hallways and how I dress and all that stuff. I realized that that was sexism and that I never thought happened to me, until they all freaked out over Girls' Nite and so many other things became clear.

Melody also spoke about becoming aware of the role that sexism played in her life through the organization of Girls' Nite:

I remember standing there in a classroom while we were advertising Girls' Nite and one of my male friends, MY friend, gets in on the cat calling and ridiculing comment making. It made me think about all the times I had laughed when one of them had made those same comments at someone else and I realized how I would encourage them by laughing. I found my voice through that experience, through having to tell people to shut up in classrooms during that time.

Rosa and Melody's comments demonstrate the various levels of surveillance and how this had unknowingly influenced their lives. Through the resistance, Rosa became aware of how she had participated in the exact behaviour she was revelling against in the backlash to Girls' Nite through dressing a certain way in order to garner a certain amount of social acceptance. She also began to realize that her thoughts regarding her own opportunities and access to power may have been incorrect. Rosa was also learning about the limits of gender expectations through this process. Melody also became aware of her own participation in surveillance through experiencing the backlash to Girls' Nite. This happened when she realized how her silent or not so silent support of her male

friends who engaged in this type of ridiculing behaviour impacted the intended target and made her complicit in producing uneven gender relationships between girls and boys.

In his work theorizing masculinities, Connell (2002) highlights that, “the peer group, not individuals are the bearers of gender definitions” (p. 220). Although Connell was referring to boys, the above comments from Izzy, Melody and Rachel illustrate that this statement can also be applied to girls in relation to the performance and acceptance of normative gender roles. Kimmel (1996) focuses more directly on issues of policing when he points out, “as adolescents we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us” (p. 132). It was in the planning of Girls’ Nite and the backlash that erupted that the girls started to become aware of the power of their peers to determine what they could and could not do. The girls’ words, combined with Connell and Kimmel, demonstrate the power that peer influence has on expressions of gender.

The exposure to harsh criticism made the girls begin to rethink their understanding of gender relations in this era of Girl Power. Faced with such adversity, as well as having a place to talk about this adversity, the girls began to develop an awareness of sedimented gender domination that was previously unknown to them. Through this awareness, the girls began to discuss how else they might be affected by sexism as well as implicated in their own surveillance. It was in these discussions that the transformative nature of the Girls’ Nite program - one that acknowledges, challenges, and attempts to change gender domination and oppression - was born.

Counter Resistance: “What are they so scared of?”

The various instances of resistance were attempts to regulate the type of expression utilized by girls in the school. It was fine for staff members to supervise a

“cute” little event to help the poor depressed girls, but when feminism and resistance became outgrowths of the event and its planning, it became a problem. The boys were fine with the girls having a pajama party to paint their toenails, but as soon as the event hinted at the politics of power in the school, the boys’ resistance became more malevolent and hateful. As the girls struggled to make meaning of and understand the complexities of systemic and institutional barriers, Jill and I were both greeted at lunch and before and after school with questions from the girls about the history of feminism, sexual harassment, and discrimination. The girls began to see the school differently and moments of sexism that had previously gone unnoticed were exposed. This led the girls to begin to publicly question, “What are they so scared of?”

The girls responded by developing an overt counter resistance¹³ of their own to the blatant and unashamed rejection of the event by some of the boys in the school. They began to gather after classroom visits to compare “stupid questions and comments” made to them during class visits and at them during hallway interactions in regards to Girls’ Nite. For the most part, the girls laughed about these statements; however, due to the personal aspect of Girls’ Nite, many of the girls could not ignore or laugh away their hurt feelings after school meetings. In an effort to show resilience and to counter homophobia, the young women “reclaimed” the labels put on Girls’ Nite by the objecting population of the school. They wrote announcements to advertise the event dubbing it “The Lesbian Pornfest, otherwise known as Girls’ Nite” (which resulted in the fastest response time from the principal in calling my classroom EVER). The discussions that

¹³ Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan. (1995) discuss two different kinds of “political resistance” (p. 26). Covert resistance refers to girls going “underground” with their feelings and knowledge, they retreat from a culture that they realize does not value their experience. Overt resistance refers to girls who manage to speak out and reject stereotypes about roles for women and femininity.

occurred amongst the organizing committee in response to this backlash prompted them to add a session entitled, "The History of Feminism". As the girls began to see and feel the impact of sexism for the first time, this led them to want to know more about the way that feminism had fought these battles in the past. Due to all the controversy surrounding Girls' Nite, by the time it finally arrived, the organizing committee felt as though they had succeeded in rebuffing the various levels of resistance. In addition, the girls who chose to come to Girls' Nite did so despite all the controversy that surrounded the event. With the feisty organizing committee and the resilient participants, it is no surprise that the actual event led to an even deeper understanding of power relations and gender domination at Westside High.

Doing Gender Differently: Female students recognizing performative gender roles

The poststructural notion that individuals are shifting subjects, who are volatile, contradictory and changing, rather than rational, unified and static beings provides a crucial framework for understanding the way that Girls' Nite addressed the complex, contradictory and contextual issues of sedimented gender roles and power at Westside High. What constitutes knowledge about what it means to be a girl is based on the multiple discourses of femininity that are culturally and historically available, which intersect with other sites of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on (Hollway, 1984; Gonick, 2003; Harris, 2004a). As was stated in the discussion on identity, individual girls can be active agents in the construction of their own subjectivity and still actively locate themselves within certain "othering" discourses of femininity, taking up these meanings and social relationships as their own. However, one's subjective positioning is not fixed, but can discursively shift as individuals read their

locations within relations of power, claiming or resisting discourses according to what they want to achieve (Hollway, 1984). It is within this framework that the Girls' Nite participants found room to question dominant gender norms and create a space that allowed the young women of Westside High more room to negotiate their gendered identity formation and the space to create their own knowledge about what it means to be a girl within the cultural context of Westside High.

The recognition that what constitutes knowledge about femininity is culturally and historically mediated (Butler, 1993) was one of the biggest and most influential aspects of the Girls' Nite program. The information sessions offered at Girls' Nite were all created and run by young women. These sessions include: "Body Image: Who creates our standards of beauty?", "Harm Reduction: How do we remain safe?", "Young Women and Depression", "Healthy Sexuality: Making decisions that are good for YOU", "Feminism, Activism and Gender Issues: Are we still burning our bras?", "Belly Dancing: Love your belly, make it move", "Improv" and "Zine Making". As can be easily determined by the titles of these sessions, their content seems to invite the questioning of confining gender norms. However, the truly disruptive part of these sessions was the fact that these sessions were entirely determined by the girls of Westside High. They were run by the girls, who had sought out expert advice, the participants were girls,¹⁴ and the knowledge produced during these sessions was produced entirely by the girls. Images of the girls sitting in circles, talking about sex, drug, condoms, alcohol, Sexually Transmitted Infections or depression can be seen on each of the films. It was in these sessions that the girls had the opportunity to produce their own knowledge, based

¹⁴ An exception was when Jill, Alison or myself would sit in on a session, upon invitation. Rarely did we sit in on an entire session, ensuring that the girls had time and space to discuss things on their own.

on their own experiences about what it meant to be a girl. It was in these moments that the girls began to trouble the culturally and historically mediated definitions of girlhood in order to create their own definitions from their own knowledge and experience about what it meant to be a girl. This opportunity tipped the scales for the first time, of who and what defines femininity, allowing the girls to be active agents of their own subjectivity and begin to counter dominant discourses of femininity that were mediating the girls' choices.

The feelings produced in these sessions were a key part of the way that Girls' Nite worked to transform the power structures at Westside High. Andrea states:

I also felt like I knew more about myself and my capabilities and my options because it was us in there, you know, it was us. I remember I looked around and it was only girls in the session, we were doing it ourselves, I think that is why it was so deep, so heavy, because it was just us, no one was talking at us, it was just us, sharing and learning from each other.

Marcia also noted this in her interview:

The sessions are so key. A lot of the time they get forgotten about because they are not the funnest part of the night, but they are so key. I feel like anything can happen in them. This year, I walked between the sessions as they were going on and I was like, "We can do this." I was so proud of what the girls were saying and doing in those sessions.

Finally, Rachel noted:

They are so powerful, what happens in those sessions is just so powerful.

The above quotes, read alongside the video footage of the sessions, demonstrate the power that girls gain when given the time and space to label and define for themselves what it means to be a girl. Through these sessions, the girls felt empowered by the knowledge production they had just participated in, giving them an increased sense of awareness and power over their own bodies.

In the introductory chapter, one of the most notable aspects of Girls' Nite did not happen in a particular session or as a result of one particular moment. The most notable aspect of Girls' Nite was the result of the way the girls began to enact their newfound knowledge about gender, performativity, and resistance. As they began to experiment with feelings of power and resistance, the girls started reaching out to each other, supporting each other, laughing with each other, and EATING with each other. These actions were a way for the girls to begin to break out of the dominant gender performances of hyper femininity that had unknowingly been regulating the girls' actions for so long. It was within these small moments of resistance that disruptions to the typical gender performances began to occur. This disruption can be seen in each of the girls' movies, demonstrating the central part that the creation of such a space plays in the events of Girls' Nite. The films are filled with images of girls eating, lying in the hallways, dancing, singing, learning together during sessions and just generally supporting each other. It was in these moments and in this atmosphere, with their newly forming confidence in their ability to define for themselves what it means to be a girl, that the girls began to recognize and unpack the domination and oppression that regulated their experience during the average school day. The challenge for the girls was to find a way to continue these lessons and actions once they left the space of Girls' Nite.

It was after the sessions were over, while the girls were roaming around the school, that Madeleine initiated that first group conversation about what was different in the school during Girls' Nite and how to maintain this feeling when everyone returned to school on Monday. The girls all agreed that the major element missing at Girls' Nite that was found in the regular school environment was boys. In their line of questioning about

how to achieve this feeling of “a big hug” in their regular school day, the girls kept turning back to the lack of boys in the space. Jill and I watched this conversation unfold, throwing raised eyebrows at each other, wondering ourselves where this conversation would lead to. One of the girls announced, “Let’s make Westside an all girls’ school!!!” This suggestion was met with cheers and groans alike. Jill chose this moment to step in, suggesting that even if Westside were an all girls’ school, the problem at hand would still exist. We attempted to steer the conversation in a more pro-active direction, focussing the girls’ attentions to things that they could actually change. We started this conversation by asking the girls two questions. The first was, “why don’t you treat each other this way all the time?” and the second was, “what is stopping you from starting to do this on Monday?” These questions were met with a lot of raised eye brows and hums and haws, but in the discussions that followed the girls started to openly talk about the surveillance and gender regulation and the impact that these methods of oppression had on their everyday school lives. As the girls began to brainstorm ways they could subvert and disrupt the surveillance, they began to focus on the actions that they actively participate in, in terms of defining their own gendered identity.

This led the girls to begin to more clearly understand the possibility of performing gender. Judith Butler (1993) asserts that performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act”, but, rather, as “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names...the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performance fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference...” (p. 2). In relation to Girls’ Nite, in this moment of disruption, the young women realized that the gender norms

under which they had been operating (that boys take up more space than girls, that girls do act and dress one way, while boys act and dress another way) were not “biological” differences or related to male or female virtue. Rather, the girls had been performing the differences into reality, one which constituted what they could and could not do in the hallways of their own school. In this moment the young women began to realize the possibility for disrupting these gender performances. The girls were starting to see that identity is shifting and changing rather than static and unified. This recognition combined with the feelings of empowerment lingering from their sessions, opened up new possibilities for the girls to being to re-imagine what it meant for them to assert their gendered identity in the hallways of Westside High. They began to envision ways that they could disrupt expected gender performance and begin to define for themselves what it meant to be a girl at Westside High.

The girls agreed that the best way to start this process was to begin with themselves and disrupt the notion that it is normal for girls to hate each other and to be mean to each other. In order to do this they set out to build and nurture the friendships and community that was developing in the hallways of Westside High that night. In this space, the resistant and agentic nature of Girls’ Nite, one in which the girls began to organize and make change for themselves, was born.

The creation, reaction and implementation of Girls Nite gave the girls of Westside High the space to recognize that it was the repetitiveness of the gender performance that constituted the “realness” of gender (Butler, 1990, 1993). This different space, away from many of the dominant hegemonic forces of gender performativity, provided the girls with a means through which different definitions of gender could begin to emerge. This

“girls only” space showed the girls that their norms of competition, insecurity and uneasiness could take on a different framework within the school walls and challenged their previously held beliefs that these traits of competition and insecurity were “just a normal part” of girlhood. It was in this space, almost spontaneously that the young women of Westside High began to undermine and subvert the rigid gender binaries that became too apparent during the planning stages of Girls’ Nite. Girls’ Nite provides the girls with a context in which they can begin to perform different kinds of femininity.

The experience of subverting and challenging traditional gender roles did not end once the sleepover ended. The girls returned to school on Monday, hugging each other in the hallways and full of determination to keep their new-found community. They met in our classrooms to continue their discussions and begin to plan how to maintain and promote the feelings they had at Girls’ Nite. The support network that was built that night and maintained after Girls’ Nite provided the girls with a grounding force from which to begin to challenge notions about gender roles that had become so sedimented at Westside High. As was previously stated, much of the oppressive gender relations were based in peer group expectations that were set in culturally specific contexts. If these relationships were going to change, the girls knew they needed to change the gender definitions that were prevalent at the school, and the only way they could do that was to begin to model the changes that they were hoping to see in the school.

The first Girls’ Nite set the stage for the participating girls at Westside High to move forward with their goal of transforming Westside High into a more gender friendly-space¹⁵. The girls knew that this would not happen overnight or in one school year,

¹⁵ The gender-friendly space referred to here moves beyond just the male female binary. Girls’ Nite started out addressing just the male-female, but through the numerous discussions on gender performance these

resulting in the ongoing Girls' Nite project, now completing its fourth year. Throughout the years the girls involved have continued to plan the events surrounding Girls' Nite with the same disruptive and transformative goals that evolved out of the first Girls' Nite sleepover in an effort to continue to transform gender relations at Westside High.

Doing Gender Differently: Female students challenging performative gender roles as a way to disrupt, transform and claim power within the walls of Westside High

The experience of school life, with all its contradictions and complexity is one of experiencing sets of power relations. That experience will be manifested in a set of gendered practises. Such gendered practises will be adapted, modified and translated (recontextualized) in the setting of school corridors and classrooms. Such practises will involve a complex web of accommodation and resistance. (Arnot, 2002, p. 142)

There are a number of projects that were implemented by the Girls' Nite committee in order to accomplish the mission of making Westside High a more gender friendly school. These projects span the spectrum of intention, effort, involvement and detail, and each one addressed different aspects of the sedimented gender domination that the girls had become aware of through the process of the first Girls' Nite. Some of these projects involved simple awareness campaigns using posters and announcements to educate the school community about issues such as sexual assault, women's history or various aspects of sexism, to full-fledged campaigns, including information meetings, discussion groups and school-wide presentations, weekly discussion groups to discuss various aspects of girlhood and field trips to various places, gatherings or conferences of interest to the girls, such as the "Take back the night" march, the aforementioned girl studies conference or "The House", a community health centre for women.

ideas have begun to cultivate in relation to students with non-conforming gendered identities. For more on this discussion, see chapter five.

Happening in tandem with all of these “official” and organized events was an intentional effort by the girls to begin to address aspects of their own behaviour that were contributing to the sedimented gender domination they were seeking to change. These included altering the “bitchy” behaviour the girls had identified at Girls’ Nite by greeting each other in the hallways and checking themselves and each other if they fell into old patterns of gossiping and undermining other girls, modifying their dress and their definitions of “positive male attention” and calling out boys and other teachers who were complicit in producing and reproducing oppressive gender relations.

Through their interviews and their films, the young women conveyed multiple ways that they feel Girls’ Nite has addressed issues of sexual inequality in order to make Westside High a more gender-friendly space. These solutions involved addressing both student bias and teacher bias. In relation to student bias, the way that the girls seemed to measure the success of Girls’ Nite was by addressing how it had impacted instances of sexual harassment in the school hallways. In relation to the staff, the girls spoke in detail about addressing both explicit and non-explicit sexist expectations from the teaching staff within the school. These expectations manifested themselves in multiple ways, including but not limited to, varying behavioural expectations based on gender, curriculum content, disciplinary measures and even sexual harassment from male teachers towards female students. The girls also spoke about the respect they gained by organizing Girls Nite from certain staff members; “they look at me differently now, like they are surprised I can actually DO something” (Marcia). While the girls spoke individually about numerous other issues that they felt Girls’ Nite addressed in the school, the above mentioned issues were talked about by all the girls during their interviews and therefore

these will be the issues addressed in this section to demonstrate the influence that the girls feel their efforts have had at transforming the space of Westside High.

I spy sexism: Reversing the gaze

After experiencing the feeling of life in the school without the presence of the male gaze, the girls were eager to carry this feeling forward to their everyday school life. The gaze is a particular way of looking: one that is detached, dispassionate and at the same time very powerful. The relationship between the female object and the male subject is particularly exposed through the operation of the gaze. The power/knowledge relation held within the gaze endows, through its performance, power to the gazer with respect to that which is being gazed upon (Paechter 1998, p. 9). An example in the case of schooling would be the 83% of female students who report being victims of sexual harassment (AAUW, 2001)¹⁶. The gazer would be the perpetrators of the sexual harassment, in most cases, other male students and even male teachers. Foucault (1977) describes how the known but unseen gaze can be used as an instrument of discipline for those to whom it is directed. If you know that a disciplinary authority is watching you some of the time, but do not know precisely when, you are forced to modify all of your behaviour to conform to the demands of the watcher. The notion that someone is watching you constrains all of your behaviour and the gaze becomes internalised.

If the girls were going to create the feeling of safety and freedom that they had at Girls' Nite, they knew this meant that they had to find a way to make the school

¹⁶ As the author of this thesis, I recognize that many see the numbers stated in the AAUW 2001 report as inflated. The purpose of using this number within this document is to emphasize that the number of female students who report being sexually harassed by male students far outweighs the number of male students who report being harassed by female students. There are numerous reasons for this, one of which may be that boys are less likely to report being harassed by a female student for fear of their masculinity being questioned. As a secondary school teacher in a urban centre for three years, the number of female students disclosing incidents of sexual harassment by male students far outweighed the number of male students.

community as a whole, but mostly the perpetrating male students, aware of the presence of the gaze before they could be free from its operation. Through some research, Madeleine discovered a campaign called “I spy sexism”. This campaign was originated by the Third Wave Foundation¹⁷ in the United States. There are many ways this program can be implemented, but the girls decided to start it off with an anonymous card system that resembles a suggestion box system like you would find in a store. They set up a box in the main office of the school and photocopied cards that read, “I SPY SEXISM” on one side and on the back there was a space in which students could fill out what they saw, when they saw, where they saw and if they wanted they could also write who was participating in this behaviour. The idea was that people could fill out the cards and the girls in charge would begin thinking of ways to address these issues. They wanted people to have a safe and anonymous way of reporting sexist behaviour.

The girls decided on two methods of dealing with the reported cards. The first was to talk to individuals who were named on the cards in a gentle and respectful manner in order to educate them about why their behaviour had been reported and the impact it was having on the school community. The second was to read out one card once a week on the morning announcements with a brief explanation about why that particular behaviour had been named and what was harmful and hurtful about that behaviour. All names would remain confidential and only the acts would be discussed. The hope was to start to educate the school community population about the way sexism affected not just the girls in the school, but the school community as a whole.

As you can imagine, this program was met with mixed reactions. Almost all the incidents named in the cards were committed by boys against girls. This resulted in the

¹⁷ For more information go to www.thirdwavefoundation.org.

boys of the school feeling as though they were being targeted. The young men in the school also rejected this level of surveillance on their behaviour and many, not all, but many refused to listen to the girls when they tried to talk to them about the reported behaviour. The boys often felt accused and defensive. Over time, the girls fine-tuned the language of their talks to become more about education and less about accusation. They would tell the boy that the discussion was not about trying to prove whether the action took place, but just to talk about why actions like the one reported in the card were bad for the girls in the school and the school community as a whole. They also recruited a male teacher to help them with these talks, and the young men involved would at least spend some time listening to what the girls had to say. This teacher was considered popular with the young men in the school and as a result carried a lot of cultural capital. This teacher took this role very seriously and often followed up with the young men after the initial discussions were over.

The second method of reading incidents over the PA system also received mixed reactions from the staff and students at the school. The teacher in charge of the school “radio” club that read out the morning announcements did not like the idea. At first he “forbid” the possibility of some of the girls reading out the cards during the morning announcements. He felt that it was “ridiculous” and did not want to participate in a “witch hunt”. In an effort to turn the tables on this teacher and question his use of his authority, the girls used one of the “I spy sexism” cards to report his behaviour as sexist. This resulted in a conversation between this teacher, two of the girls and the male teacher who was helping with these discussions. Eventually the teacher changed his mind, but this was due more to manipulation by the other male staff member who was supervising

these conversations than it was to any enlightened attitude shift of this teacher. Further, that did not signal the end of the issues that arose with using the school PA system as a method of public education. No matter how gentle of an approach the girls took to reading out these cards, there were always complaints from male students and a few male staff members. Many male staff members were supportive of the effort. The girls decided that even though some of the response was negative, they were trying to generate discussion about these issues to other members of the school community. They felt that even negative discussion meant that boys were talking about sexual harassment, and they decided to keep reading the cards despite the minor but noticeable backlash.

This campaign eventually proved to be so successful that girls began carrying cards around with them and simply handing them to boys and even girls when they witnessed something they felt was sexist behaviour. Cards were handed to boys for various incidents, ranging the full spectrum of sexually harassing and sexist behaviour. For example, Rachel overheard a one male student telling another that he was a “pussy” for whining over jamming his finger in his locker door while on his way to class. Izzy presented another male student with a card when he told her that the pants she was wearing gave her a “nice ass”. Finally, Marcia handed a card to a group of boys who were overheard talking about “tapping that ass” (a slang reference for having sex) in reference to a younger female student who would be attending a party with the boys that night. Reiterating Connell’s assertion that peer groups carry enormous weight in determining acceptable behaviour, many of the young men in the school began to police themselves in regards to their sexist behaviours out of fear any female student in the school would publicly challenge them. This campaign led to a reordering of the gaze,

reversing the lens onto the boys who were objectifying the girls, giving a level of power to the girls to stop this behaviour that they had previously not experienced. Through this program there is a great awareness around the operation of the gaze and how it works to subordinate girls in the school.

"They have baggage too": Young Men's Discussion Group

Negotiating everyday gender relations in schools is a complicated and often contradictory experience that demands individuals to take up certain performances of masculinities and femininities that are regulated and policed through the normalizing practises of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Within the school context, social and educational practises often reinforce a particular form of heterosexual femininity that culturally dominates the school setting. There are numerous examples of this within the school system. Gym classes are segregated by sex to avoid sexual temptation and allow the students to learn sports that are gender appropriate. School uniforms often allow girls to wear both skirts and pants, but boys are not allowed to wear skirts. Heavily influencing and affecting this particular expression of femininity is a hegemonic masculinity which operates to 'other' other gender roles and lift particular forms of masculinity to a position of power, known as "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1996). However, as Connell points out, hegemonic masculinity "is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same, it is rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (p. 76). As a result, doing hegemonic masculinity becomes a dynamic, socially and historically sanctioned performance that is generally rewarded with power and popularity for young men in schools. Hegemonic masculinity is not just the form of masculinity that is culturally

dominant, therefore signifying a position of authority and success, but it is the “expression of the privilege men *collectively* have over women” (Connell 1996, p. 209). The way that this hegemonic masculinity is enacted towards young women in secondary schools influences strongly the options young women have to perform their own gendered identity formation within school walls. Westside High does not escape this gender policing that maintains gender power positions both within the school walls and larger society. Therefore, if we are going to make schools a more gender-friendly place, we also need to address with the boys the impact of the way they express their masculinity.

Addressing issues of masculinity was also integral to addressing the gender hierarchy problem that was dictating gender performance at Westside High. Butler’s notion of performativity is useful in looking at the ways students take up the discourse of hegemonic masculinities and femininities to assert their own gendered subjectivities. It is crucial to point out that the concept of gender ‘performance’ is always one that is enacted within strictly defined cultural boundaries. It is these same boundaries that allow sexual harassment to become sedimented within the schooling context. For Butler (1994, p. 33), performativity is “that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names...this production actually happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation”. Clarifying this impact of performativity, she points out that performativity “is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established” (p. 33). The male teacher who was helping with the “I spy sexism” discussions recognized the importance of having boys and girls understand the culturally mediated boundaries that were producing hegemonic masculine and feminine identities and the effects of these

identities. Further, he wanted to build the same community for boys that he saw forming for the Girls' Nite girls, and he also wanted to create a group of pro-feminist boys who would support the girls in their efforts.

Young Women's and Young Men's Discussion Group were officially formed during this time. The groups met once a week individually during regularly scheduled extracurricular time for the school. Working in tandem, the teachers involved in Girls' Nite and this male teacher would bring the two groups together to create a space in which different and more equitable power relationships between girls and boys were modeled and encouraged.

The goal of the discussion groups was to provide the space to the boys and girls in the school to deconstruct the discourses of hegemonic masculinity and femininity that limit the option of gendered identities open to both young men and young women and which perpetuate power cultural binaries such as male/female, heterosexual/non-heterosexual that operate to exclude the Other. Through discussions, reading and activities, these groups focused on increasing the credibility and status of non-dominant expressions of masculinity and femininity, which are based on less aggressive, violent, exaggerated performances of power over others (Butler, 1993). The hope was that through providing the participants with the tools, language and knowledge, they could become aware of non-dominant expressions of gender and begin to find new ways to express their own gendered identity formation.

Activities in the groups included providing the students with readings from gender and power theorists such as Butler, Foucault and Connell and gathering to discuss the practicality and applicability of the ideas embedded in these theories to everyday life.

Through exposure to these ideas, the students were able to begin to re-envision what gender meant and how that played out in their everyday lives. Exposure to these theories combined with discussing their everyday applicability meant that the students, both boys and girls, could begin to perform their gender in ways that were not so wrapped up in oppressive and dominating actions.

Discussions were not always laden with heavy theory. On some discussion days students would simply write anonymous questions about gender or gender expectations on slips of paper and put them in a shoe box that sat on the supervising teachers' desks. At the beginning of the discussion, all the questions in the box would be read out and three or four would be decided on and tackled in the group that day. Together the students and staff would talk about the question, utilizing personal experience, ideas from readings, and creativity to address whatever issue was being discussed. These discussions were not always pleasant or easy, and there was often disagreement along the lines of "nature versus nurture" amongst the students. Having students challenge gender-driven behaviour that is typically passed off as "just boys being boys" or "typical teenage girl behaviour" was the drive behind these conversations. Too often damaging and hurtful behaviour and practises are dismissed as the result of "raging teenage hormones" rather than the attempts to defend, maintain or gain power and privilege that they usually are (Connell, 1996).

As previously stated both of these groups would be brought together once a month to discuss these issues with each other. The two discussion groups would meet to address, across gender, the collective peer influence that often limits or dictates acceptable gendered behaviour. The two groups would prepare questions to ask each

other, and this process saw more equitable relationships begin to emerge within the walls of the discussion rooms. Together the groups would discuss alternative behaviours to these expected norms and recognize the power involved in subverting these dominant norms. Amber talked about the importance of these meetings when she said:

I think one of the best things was the discussion groups. They were like the sessions at Girls' Nite, only the boys did them too. We would get the two groups together and sit around to talk to each other about the impact of our behaviours on the other group. I learned so much about boys and how they struggle with insecurities and hyper masculine expectations just like we do. They became way less annoying through these discussions and I learned not to be so angry at the boys for being big assholes. They have baggage too.

Amber's statement demonstrates the way that the young men's and young women's discussion groups were able to break down the gender barriers and provide support networks between the boys and girls who were genuinely interested in challenging hegemonic gender roles. Amber's statement shows that the groups were successful in destabilizing regulatory gender norms and created a space for shifts in gendered identity to occur. In her statement, "They became way less annoying and I learned to not be so angry with the boys for being such big assholes. They have baggage too", we see that the young men's and young women's discussion groups and the bringing together of these groups allowed for different and more equitable power relationships between boys and girls to emerge and develop. That is, they created gender performances that were not constituted through oppressive and harassing behaviours. It allowed relationships to emerge and gender performances to develop between the sexes that were not based on sexually harassing or dominating behaviours. The boys and girls who participated in this aspect of programming entitled it, "Doing Gender Differently" and attempted to model equitable relationships between young men and women for the rest of the school.

Another important aspect of these groups was the opportunity for the boys and the girls to begin to create their own definitions of gender and build their own knowledge about what it meant to be a boy or a girl. Like the sessions at Girls' Nite, the topics and conversations were completely student driven, providing the students with the opportunity to produce their own knowledge about performing gender rather than following or submitting to hegemonic norms and definitions that are often damaging. This self-empowering process allowed the students to feel agentic in moving forward in transforming the hegemonic gender roles that had been so damaging and limiting to both the genders at Westside High. Through these discussions groups the participants were able to build supportive relationships that saw them reward, encourage and assist each other as they attempted to subvert gender norms at Westside High.

“They look at me differently now”: Addressing staff expectations of femininity

As stated throughout this chapter, students were not the only hurdle to overcome when addressing sedimented gender roles within the school community at Westside High. There were many layers to addressing the teachers' outward and systemic gender expectations that the girls still deal with to this day. The girls also felt that there was the need to address teachers' sexist attitudes, which was easier with some teachers than with others. Some teachers' sexist attitudes were easily identifiable, such as the teachers who had been so outspoken with their disapproval during the Girls' Nite organizing. These teachers were easily targeted by the girls during the “I spy sexism” campaign and numerous confrontations ensued. There were teachers who proclaimed to support the efforts and mandates of Girls' Nite and yet still displayed sexist attitudes within their classroom through a variety of actions. These include curriculum choice, methods of

discipline and varying behavioural expectations for boys and girls. With their new-found confidence from the "I spy sexism" campaign, the girls began to address these issues with the teachers and staff at Westside High.

Addressing public displays of sexism

The teachers who had displayed outwardly sexist attitudes during the organizing of Girls' Nite became easy targets for the girls as they attempted to transform the space of Westside High. Once these young women developed a sense of confidence surrounding their efforts to address sexism at Westside High, they set their sights on the teachers who were so complicit in producing and reproducing gender imbalance at the school. The girls had not forgotten the way that the actions of these teachers had created an environment that was so hurtful and counter productive to the goals of Girls' Nite, and they were determined to address this with these teachers. This was not always pretty, nor was it always done in the most productive manner, but it most certainly resulted in more conversations about sexism than any of these teachers had probably had in their careers.

The girls began to watch these teachers like hawks, almost stalking their every move, just waiting for an inappropriate comment or action to be made. If the teacher was involved in supervising an extra-curricular activity at the school, the girls would develop a sudden interest in that activity and either watch while the teacher coached or join the team or club if they could. This resulted in these teachers being constantly surveilled by a group of angry feminist teen girls which in turn resulted in these teachers being barraged with "I spy sexism" cards admonishing particular behaviours. On numerous occasions, the girls would choose to read out the activity of one of these teachers during their weekly chosen announcement for the campaign. While the girls would never

actually name which teacher they were talking about in their announcements, they would usually drop some hint to make it easy to determine which teacher they were talking about. For example they would state, "During the boys' soccer practise yesterday afternoon, a member of our staff was heard telling the boys that they were "running like a bunch of girls". They would follow this with their reasons why this was not appropriate behaviour, usually adding in, "especially for a teacher!"

As you can imagine, the teachers involved did not take these incidents lightly. Jill and I were told to "get them under control" or criticized for "creating monsters" or not being able to "control" the Girls' Nite girls. We did talk to the girls about being strategic with their criticism, but we never told them to alter their behaviour. These teachers complained to the principal, whose first response was to call Jill and me into her office to ask us what was going on. When we answered that the girls were trying to transform Westside High into a more gender-friendly school, she got onside with the program, although she was never overly ecstatic about the method behind the gender-friendly madness of the girls. For those teachers who engaged in sexism, there was no great moment of enlightenment that caused them to change their behaviour. In the end, it was the girls' perseverance and dedication that led these teachers to begin to alter their attitudes while at school. The girls just stayed on these teachers and after numerous incidents, announcements and presenting of cards, the teachers just gave up fighting the girls.

This example demonstrates one way the girls utilized their new-found knowledge about gender relations to alter power relationships in the school. Paechter (1998) identifies positional power within schools, such as that of a teacher over a student, as

being the most difficult to alter. In this example the girls were able to use their new-found knowledge and confidence in this knowledge to challenge those in positional power positions in order to alter the sexist attitudes of these teachers and in doing so disrupt traditional power relations between teacher and student, male and female. These encounters proved to be very powerful not only to the girls but also to the school.

Rachel, who did not join Girls' Nite until her last year in high school, alludes to this when she says,

When I was in grade 10 and the "I spy sexism" campaign kept targeting Leon, Richard and Evan. I was on girls' soccer team and I remember learning so much of what Richard was doing was inappropriate behaviour, telling us we were cry babies and that even WE ran like a bunch of girls. I learned so much about what people, but mostly teachers should and shouldn't say during that time and I started to call out Richard at soccer practise. I totally noticed when he stopped making those comments and I totally felt like, "Yeah, we got you."

Marcia's comments also demonstrate the way that these incidents altered the way that the girls felt power at the school. She comments on targeting Richard as well,

I had math class with Richard and even before Girls' Nite I knew that the stuff he said and did was crappy, it made me feel crappy and I knew it was crappy. Through Girls' Nite we learned why it was crappy and that was a huge thing. I mean, I don't think it takes much to be smarter than Richard, but we knew more than him about this issue so every time we got in fights with him about it he would lose, in front of the whole class, he would lose. That feeling of being able to beat him at his own game was so amazing, so amazing.

While these particular teachers may not have been enlightened into more progressive attitudes in regards to women, they were forced to stop producing and reproducing a classroom atmosphere that allowed for sedimented ideas about gender to flourish and this made the girls feel vindicated for their efforts and powerful in ways that they had never felt before.

Addressing not so public displays of sexism

The young women also began to address teachers' differing expectations in student behaviour based on gender. The girls became adept at noting that teachers were much more tolerant of male students being rowdy and loud in class than they were of female students. The girls noted that as they began to take up more space in the classroom by becoming louder in the classroom, no longer apologizing for asking questions or telling boys off for making inappropriate comments in class, they were spending more time being disciplined by teachers. These kinds of differing behavioural expectations from teachers are a large part of the reproduction of traditional gender roles that still occur within schools (Larkin, 1997; AAUW, 2001; Arnot, 2002; Lahelma, 2002). The girls also understood the implications of these expectations. Melody noted:

I remember after the first Girls' Nite when we are all fired up and gung ho to change everything in the school in like a week. I spent so much time in detention in Lola's class because I was always calling her out on her sexist expectations. I would watch what she put up with from the guys and then try to do it myself and she would lose her mind all over me. It is those sorts of things from teachers, people in authority positions that tell me how I should act and what I should do. She would reward us for acting a certain way and punish us for acting like the guys acted. That was one of the hardest parts of Girls' Nite, being that aware and being so frustrated all the time.

Through their various experiences in organizing and participating in Girls' Nite, the girls were well aware that teachers had the ability to produce or reproduce sexism in their classroom. They had lived this reality during the backlash and they were not prepared to keep living it after Girls' Nite. There were certain teachers in the school with whom the girls felt comfortable addressing these issues during a one-on-one conversation after class. Usually these teachers were receptive to the girls' efforts to raise awareness and they would come to talk to Jill and I about ways that they could alter their behaviour to create a more gender equitable classroom space. However, there were other teachers with whom the girls did not feel would be receptive to their attempts, and with these

teachers they were more subversive and publicly defiant. Often, these teachers would come to talk to Jill and I with “concerns” over the behaviour of the “Girls’ Nite Girls”. These teachers would tell Jill and I that they were “scared” of the girls’ behaviour in class or they would refer to the girls as “the biggest bullies in school”. Through deconstructing these comments, Jill and I would discuss with the teachers why the girls were acting the way they were and what the teacher could do in order to create a more gender friendly space for girls to express themselves in the classroom. These conversations were often difficult and laden with passive aggressive comments from both sides. For some of these teachers these conversations were effective, yet others would take their case to the principal in attempts to “get these girls back on track”. It was at this stage that Jill and I would have honest conversations with the girls about risking their grades in order to challenge a teacher. These conversations revolved around strategic and subversive ways to disrupt the gendered expectations that these teachers carried, often pulling us back to various ways the girls could resist the teacher’s attempt to gender the girls. Rosa remembers these conversations and what they meant to her,

I remember when Melody and I kept getting into fights with Patricia about the way she treated girls and boys in her classroom. I was always in trouble with her and nothing seemed to work. You and Jill and Melody and I all sat down and talked about it and we talked about other ways we could make our point to Patricia without ending up in trouble all the time. I remember being really pissed at first, like pissed that you were actually telling us reign it in. But then when we had to do a project for that class (drama) we did a play on the impact of the way Patricia treated girls and boys differently in class, but we of course didn’t name her, it was just this broad sort of “here is what it is like to be a girl in these classes” type of thing. I think she actually learned something because she became a lot stricter with the guys after that project. And that was a valuable lesson for me, that I don’t always need to be all up in someone’s face to show them my power, it can be in different ways too.

For the girls, confronting teacher attitudes proved to be one of the most powerful transformations that occurred as a result of Girls’ Nite. It was not always whether they

were successful in altering teacher attitudes, but the fact that they could actually confront a teacher on an issue that was so important to them. In all of the girls' quotes, they allude to how the knowledge that they gained at Girls' Nite gave them awareness about why they may have been feeling "crappy" in a teacher's classroom and knowledge to address that issue with the teacher. Through confronting these teachers the girls discovered access to power that they did not know existed prior to Girls' Nite. It was these confrontations that illuminated for the girls the possibility that power was "never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). It was in these confrontations that the girls realised that they could affect power the way that power had affected them for so long.

Conclusion

Within this research, power proved to be one of the most controversial aspects of the Girls' Nite program. The girls are adamant that the program allowed them to re-envision the way power operated in their lives. This view of power as multiply located became clear after the girls began to grasp and embody the concept of gender performativity. As Rachel said in a previous chapter, "I just don't feel like being a girl today". With their new understanding of gender, performance and power, the girls were able to disrupt and trouble hegemonic gender expectations. Through this awareness and this embodiment of power in a new way the girls began to rewrite and redefine what being a girl meant for them. It was in this process of redefining that they found the confidence and knowledge to begin to challenge those who had previously held positions of power at Westside High. The act of re-writing their own definitions of gender and

determining for themselves what it meant to be a girl within the walls of Westside High enabled the girls to transform the space into a more girl friendly space. This transformation did not happen smoothly. However, through the resistance that they faced from other students and some staff members the girls became even more sure of the need to continue their path of transforming the space of Westside High into a more gender friendly school.

As was stated in the introduction to this chapter, educational research on young women and power has tended to focus on the failure of schools to adequately educate young women and the impact that this power imbalance has on girls' educational choices. It is important however to begin to recognize that girls are not always lacking in school. While the system may be structured around models of hegemonic masculinity, girls are not without voice in school. This is not to excuse the othering of girls in school and even within this chapter the way girls are limited was pointed out numerous times. These othering structures are indeed powerful, however if we begin to view them as operating in a "netlike function", never "localized here nor there" we can set in motion the parameters required for students to resist and alter the way that schools limit the options for students to perform their gender. It was through this process of re-envisioning power that the girls were able to make the biggest shifts in their identity formation during their secondary school years. Through a new definition of power the girls could exert and embody power in a way that, while not free from the hegemonic relationships that they were used to, definitely allowed the girls to feel powerful in ways that had previously escaped them as young women within the school system. The next chapter will examine

and critique the overall Girls' Nite program, focussing specifically on the limits to transforming gender regimes through a single sex program.

Chapter Four:

CRITIQUING THE PROGRAM: SCHOOL AS A SITE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

We know what it is like to be silenced. We know the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margins that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. (hooks, 1990, p. 152)

The possibility that schools can be used as a site for social change is often overlooked in critical educational research. In the past two decades a considerable amount of educational research has focused on the ways in which schools both produce and reproduce social inequity (Apple, 1995; Gaskell, 1992; Giroux, 1983; Weis & Fine, 1993). While it is imperative that we continue to point out that schooling often serves to legitimize widespread structural inequalities, it is equally important to entertain the possibility that schools can also be used by a variety of actors as sites for social change. Girls' Nite provides an example of this possibility, demonstrating that schools, teachers and students can work "against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991) to challenge hegemonic notions about gender and create a more egalitarian space of schooling. Through a careful examination of the program, its strengths and weaknesses, Girls Nite can provide a grounding example for staff and students who wish to challenge and disrupt the detrimental gender hierarchies that are so prevalent in the spaces of public schooling.

That being said, the program was not without its problems, and applying or turning a critical eye on the program can only serve to benefit its intended outcome. The weaknesses examined include a discussion of the value and risk of essentializing or reinscribing gender through a program designed to trouble dominant gender norms and stereotypes. I will look at how students of colour fit into the Girls' Nite program as it

relates to their place within the walls of Westside High. I will also look at the harmful ways that some of the girls chose to enact their new definitions of power and the influence that this had on the school as a whole. I will conclude the critique on a positive note, demonstrating the ways that Girls Nite provided space for critical social thought to emerge through the eyes of the students, allowing for the creation of social action to challenge sedimented and damaging gender norms.

Girls' Nite, Girl Power: The essentializing risk of a program called Girls' Nite

The term girl power has become a more commonly used word in everyday vocabulary. We see it in newspapers and magazines, numerous books carry the term in their title and an Internet search reveals numerous websites linked to girlpower. For many of these articles, books and websites, the intended goal is "to help encourage and motivate girls to make the most of their lives" (www.girlpower.gov) or "to empower girls worldwide" (www.girl.com.au). Scattered amongst these resources are referents to an authentic state of girlness, reifying a sense of authentic female virtue. This is accomplished through a call to girls reminding them that they love to shop, want to be brides, love clothes and love pyjama parties. With a title such as "Girls' Nite" it is hard to imagine that the program differs greatly from the gender essentializing that is so common amongst these other girl themed resources. Another risk of Girls' Nite is use of exclusionary (read "safe") space as a way to create a space for young women to begin to critically analyse their own gender subordination. Any program that focuses on an age and gender-based category as its subject of inquiry runs the risk of implying a natural and fixed state of being for that category, and Girls' Nite is not an exception. As part of

critically assessing this program, the essentializing risk of the program should be discussed if the gender disruptive goals of Girls' Nite are going to be met.

Utilizing the term Girls' Nite could imply that the program views girls or girlhood as an authentic state only requiring that girls need to feel confident with this state in order to reach a the liberal position of empowered "Bitch Goddess" leading to an eternal happiness so often mythologized by popular media. Utilizing the term "girl" runs the risk of domesticating or subverting feminist efforts into a collection of empty slogans and sexualized images. This risk was illuminated when Girls' Nite became known as "Pillow Fighting Pornfest" and the girls were told that all they could or should be doing is "painting their toenails in their underwear". Utilizing a term that conjures up images of oversexed pop stars or connotes an authentic state of being associated with girlhood or gender by a program that aims to disrupt dominant expectations about gender warrants a great deal of consideration.

Arguing that the program that carries the term "girl" in its title does not reify gender may be pointless. However, there are many positive aspects to the program that allow it to chip away at the liberal girlpower notions that are so readily available in the media. For example, a school-wide fury was ignited over the possibility of excluding boys due to the use of the term "girl" in the title of the program. Many feminists, whether liberal or radical, would find these school-wide conversations, occurring in classrooms and hallways between and amongst students and staff, admirable and disruptive. Many of these conversations saw the intersections of feminist politics, sexuality, education and popular culture that caused the title Girls' Nite to be more

significant and effective in troubling gender norms than if another, less popular title had been chosen.

Many would argue that a program entitled Girls' Nite could attract the more conformist girls and push away the more radical girls within the school, which would only serve to further marginalize the more radical non-conformist girls at Westside High. While the title did attract many girls who were caught up in the "girlpower" discourse, it also created the opportunity for more radical girls to challenge these notions of pink power. Izzy pointed this out during her interview when she remembered an incident at the first Girls' Nite.

Remember at the first Girls' Nite when that grade nine girl came out of the bathroom wearing that white face mask and said "What girl doesn't love a good face mask?" There was a moment for me when I thought people might find out I didn't do that girlie stuff, but some of the other girls, like Madeleine said they didn't do that stuff and then you said you didn't do that stuff and that started a whole conversation about all the "girlpower", "be proud of your pink power" "embrace your inner girl" stuff. I went home and told my mom about it and she started to think about how she had been so supportive of the girlpower stuff but that maybe she should just be supportive of me instead. It was definitely a moment for us and for me in general about that whole girl power movement. It made me feel not so weird for not loving toenail polish and pink.

The conversation Izzy was referring to was one that continued as Girls' Nite evolved. During preparation for the fourth Girls' Nite the girls decided they wanted to design a logo for the event. There was great debate between the use of giant lips or the clenched fist surrounded by the symbol for woman made famous during the initial feminist battles of the 1960's. Many girls rejected the use of the big red lips because they felt that the symbol sent a message that Girls Nite encouraged and promoted a natural state of being for girls (embracing make-up, loving all things "girlie") and that Girls' Nite was promoting space where "girls can be girls" (FN April 21, 2005). Instead the girls chose

the fist and the woman symbol, acknowledging the possibility that both symbols may promote gender binaries, the girls involved in this discussion felt that the symbol of resistance rather than red lips was more fitting for a program that creates a space for critical thought about essentializing gender, where girls were addressing their own ideas about femininity and talking with each other about their own gender choices.

The title “Girls’ Nite” for the program proved to be a way to provide a crucial feminist analysis into the girl power phenomenon that had infiltrated the everyday lexicon of not only the girls at Westside High, but also their parents. As Izzy showed above, it allowed the girls to examine and consider the ways that popular culture had been shaping their views about girlhood and gender in a way that may or may not have led to greater options and choices for them as individuals. While the title “Girls’ Nite” does not invoke the same political resistance as more resistant name, such as “Riot Grrrl” or “Bikini Kill” might, the title does cry for a significant change in the lives of girls (and boys) through a call for a change in the traditional space of schooling. This change would create a space in which the conditions and implications of the regulation and surveillance of gender domination are openly discussed and addressed and one that encourages girls to gather and share their multiple experiences of girlhood.

Rather than essentializing dominant feminine gender norms, Girls’ Nite provided a much needed space for various young women, positioned in various social and political circles throughout Westside High to begin to jointly critically analyse the feminine discourse that had played such a big part in shaping their identity choices. All of the girls in this study stated that Girls’ Nite gave them a place in the school that they did not have prior to the program’s existence. Amber said,

It gave me a place, nothing else fit for me, but this fit for me, it let me just be me and not have to be anything else but me. The only requirement to be part of it was that I was a girl, I fit that category. And it really gave me a face in the school, I was doing something important.

Andrea had similar sentiments about the program when she said:

I was allowed to be involved in GN. It didn't matter if I was popular or not. I really think that student council, if I look at all the kids on student council, it is most popular in grade nine, in grade ten, it is just a popularity contest. It doesn't matter who you are, if you want to help with GN, you are welcome to...It feels really good to be involved in something, to be involved in something that matters.

Finally Marcia stated,

I can express myself, people actually take me seriously in this environment. I feel a lot more comfortable with myself. I don't think about menial, superficial things that don't have to matter to me, but matter to everyone else. I don't think about those things as much. I think about my learning and how I can help impact other girls because of the way I feel. I didn't feel powerful, but now I do feel powerful.

Prior to their involvement with Girls' Nite, each of these girls was located in a different social circle within the school and Girls' Nite was the factor that brought them together as a group. All of the girls commented on the ability of Girls' Nite to "break down age and social barriers" as well as "teach girls how to get along". This idea is firmly situated as a central aspect of Girls' Nite in each of the girls' films, demonstrating the importance that the girls place on having a gathering space to share, compare and work through their thoughts together. Sarah states:

I would have never talked to any of the girls (specifically referring to the girls in the study) if I hadn't been involved in Girls' Nite and now they are among my closest friends, but I still have my other closest friends. I had all these real friendships, friendships that mattered. It is like through Girls' Nite I didn't lose friends or have to choose, I just had more good close friends. It was like I had a whole school of good friends that I could count on.

Amber, Andrea and Marcia demonstrate that Girls' Nite was able to provide a much needed universal space within the school cutting across through various social circles,

athletic abilities and political interests. Sarah's comments reveal that within this space and through the type of sharing that went on in the Girls' Nite space, the girls were able to tease apart the mean girls' discourse and create "friendships that mattered", allowing the girls to live the ideals of the gendered identity choices that they were creating through participating in Girls' Nite. The fact that each of these girls found a place in the school to express themselves, be involved in something that mattered and feel powerful in ways they did not feel powerful before speaks to the ability of the program to create a space for critical thought rather than a space that essentialized and reified dominant gender norms.

Thorne (1993) finds that a common narrative describing boys and girls as living in separate worlds exaggerates gender differences and dichotomizes the elaborate range of possible gender performances. Through the single sex nature of the program Girls' Nite set a binary that implied a natural and fixed state to gender and sex, further essentializing a gender binary. By organizing a Girls' Nite and not organizing a "Boys' Nite" the program ran the risk of implying that everything was okay for boys, that they had all the power they needed and there was no need for a space to deconstruct the expectations of masculinity. However, through the backlash to "Girls' Nite" numerous discussions erupted in which both boys and girls participated in discussions about how gender is constructed and therefore "performed" which allowed for an ongoing dialogue between the sexes around expectations of gender to occur.

An example of this occurred in my grade eleven sociology class during the early stages of the program when boys were expressing their initial backlash to the program. One of the boys asked me if they could have a "Guys' Night"; my response was to ask what a "Guys' Night" would look like. The student responded with stereotypical hyper-

masculine notions about what boys should do if they were together in a room overnight. These activities included watching violent films, playing violent video games, reading “Maxim” magazine¹⁸ and talking about sex (with girls). This opened up a class-wide conversation about the impact of hyper-masculine stereotypes on boys’ identity choices in secondary school. As a teacher, I was struck by how entrenched the boys and girls in this particular class seemed to be within these stereotypes. As a result I went home and planned an entire unit for the class on the idea that manhood or masculinity was a fixed, inevitable, natural state of being. We watched various films and read various articles that articulated the stance that what culture embraces as “masculine” can be better understood as an ideal standard, a projection or a pose that boys and men often adopt to shield their vulnerability and adapt to expectations of their immediate social environments. As a class we deconstructed the extreme notions of masculinity that emphasize toughness and physical strength and gaining the respect of others through violence or the threat of it. As part of this unit we read an article on violent crime rates in the United States (a Canadian article was not available at the time) which stated that 90% of victims and perpetrators of violent crime in the United States were men (Media Education Foundation, 2000). This unit forced the girls to move away from the victim discourse that had laced their contributions to class discussion and positioned the boys to begin to unpack the impact of their identity choices on their own physical safety.

This unit and this class were not reflective of the discussions that were happening in all classrooms; however, it is reflective of the discussions that were happening in *some* of the classrooms. Various teachers approached Jill and myself about how to foster

¹⁸ Maxim is a “men’s” magazine famous for its pages of barely dressed women and promotion of hyper masculine notions of manhood. The title bar for the Maxim website reads “Girls, Sex, Sports on Maxim”

progressive and educational discussions in their classrooms as well as to seek out help in securing resources that they could integrate into their regular lesson plans. In a school of 525 students, if these kinds of discussions were happening in at least 5 classrooms, then about 30% of the student population was participating in these gender disruptive conversations during their class time. Conversations such as these helped to counter the belief that all was okay with masculinity and boys and also allowed boys to begin conversations of their own about gender construction that were previously unavailable to them. It is through these discussions that Girls' Nite was able to address the essentializing risk of the single-sex nature of the program.

Throughout the four years of Girls Nite, these conversations began to shift to a call from the participating students for a non-sex specific space in which gender construction could be discussed and addressed. This is evident through the introduction of the Young Men's Discussion Group and the bridging of this group with the Young Women's Discussion Group. Also, many of the girls touched on the need for Girls' Nite to find a way for these conversations to occur simultaneously to the girl-based discussions. Sarah touched on this when she stated:

There are times when I feel like I am past the discussions that a lot of the younger girls at Girls' Nite are having. I want them to have those conversations, they are important, I had to have them to get where I am and I want to facilitate the younger girls in having those conversations. But at the same time, I wonder if we aren't making it worse by being so obvious about it, "Girls' Nite you know, GIRLS. I want some space to figure out what all that means and what it means to identify as a girl, but I also know that I wouldn't have even thought twice about this stuff without Girls' Nite so we need to sort of have another section to Girls' Nite for people who want to have those conversations.

Melody also speaks to this desire, although her thoughts are located in a different area:

I am having a hard time figuring out why we can't have boys there, like the good boys, you know Michael and Jason boys who are into these gender discussions too. They need a safe space to talk about this stuff too and we

could all have that conversation. But I also want the younger girls to have the same experience with Girls' Nite that I had because I don't think that I could have gotten where I am with all this unless I had lived through the experience of Girls' Nite, it was that all-girls space that really made me see how much of my self-esteem was tied up in what guys thought of me and how much I played into that. But I think we also need to let those guys come. I haven't figured this all out yet. I don't know...

Finally, Marcia touches on the most complicated aspect of Girls' Nite, which is the question of what to do with non-gender conforming students. She states:

What about the m-f kids, I mean they are girls and they want to be girls and they should be able to come. But then we run the risk of losing some of the other girls who need to be there because they don't think it is a "Girls' Nite" anymore. But I see an opportunity for education there as well and I know we need to address this, but how? We really need to think about this and start talking about this because otherwise the whole purpose of Girls' Nite is lost. I mean these students are living the exact stuff we talk about, living in the middle, living the struggle of gender choice, proving all the stuff we talk about with Girls' Nite about gender being constructed and not set by boobs and penis.

These statements demonstrate the complexity of attempting to disrupt and transgress gender norms and expectations. Both Sarah and Melody state that they are ready to start tackling issues of gender construction on a greater level than a single-sex program allows; however, they are also adamant that it was the single sex nature of the program that allowed them to get to this level of critical thought. Marcia addresses one of the toughest questions to emerge from the Girls' Nite program, where do the non-gender conforming students, students who may be transitioning or who may not identify as either a boy or a girl, fit within this gender disrupting program?

Through its disruptive programming, Girls' Nite gives the impression that it is opening up transgressive gender discussions, however with such a narrow focus on the girl-boy divide it delineates a "desirable body" through what Foucault calls a "regulatory ideal" (1978). Through its constant discussion about "girls" and "boys" and "girls versus boys", Girls' Nite risks becoming a regulatory power that could determine whether a

person is either a welcomed subject in the school or is cast as its “constitutive outside” (p. 3) whose presence is made abject by their failure to conform to a normative mould of girl or boy. Consequently, Girls’ Nite could be part of a regulatory ideal that forms a “curriculum of the body” (Lesko, 1988) that teaches students to see bodies as either normal or abnormal.

The year after I collected data, Girls’ Nite began to address this gap in its programming. In its fourth year, Girls’ Nite opened up registration to m-f identified students in the school, but the program was still figuring out how to deal with this issue on a greater level, in terms of the identified need for a girl-specific space. As was stated in the introductory chapter, Westside is home to a gender awareness program entitled “Students Against Stereotyping Sexuality” (S.A.S.S.). Girls’ Nite is partnering with S.A.S.S. to address these issues and the sexuality/gender intersection as it applies to each of their programs. Sarah and Melody’s ideas about gender demonstrate the necessity of a space, where subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1988) can be articulated away from surveillance and regulation. However, if Girls’ Nite is going to accomplish its goal of disrupting and transgressing dominant gender norms and expectations, then reaching out to and providing space for the non-gender conforming students in the school is an area that must be addressed.

Where is the colour?: How does Girls’ Nite address the intersections of race and gender?

As was noted in the introductory chapter, there is a lack of class and race analysis as it relates to girlhood at Westside High within this document. Not talking about issues of race and racialization at Westside High does not mean that they did not exist. In fact,

the opposite is true. At the time of data collection the student population of Westside High was approximately half white and half students of colour. It would be impossible for these issues not to be present. Throughout the thesis, I outline some remarkably progressive programming that was being delivered around sexuality and class; however what is lacking at Westside High is a program to address issues of race, racism and ethnicity. Most of the progressive programming that was occurring at Westside High was facilitated by the same small group of dedicated and progressively minded teachers. Among this group of teachers, there were no teachers of colour or teacher who felt that this was an area of expertise.

igh Hi HigThe same year that we started Girls' Nite, Jill and myself also started a student group for African Canadian students. This group hoped to provide an outlet for students of colour to connect about their common experiences as well as educate the rest of the student body about what it meant to be a student of colour within the community of Westside High. After six months the group began to fall apart because the students could not agree on whether they would allow other (non-African origin) students of colour to join the group. In-group over this issue, along with the fact that it was being run by two white teachers proved too overwhelming for Jill, myself and the students to handle. We attempted to bring in person of colour to help facilitate the group, however our efforts proved unsuccessful and eventually the group died a slow and silent death. The dynamics of the group and the struggle to keep the group alive could be an entire research project of it own. The politics of identity involved in a group for students of colour being run by two white teachers was not taken lightly by Jill and myself. The end of this group proved to be a painful experience for Jill and I; however, we did manage to move most of

the girls¹⁹ involved in the African Canadian Students Club over to the Girls' Nite program.

The introduction of African Canadian students to the organizing committee of Girls' Nite brought a new element to the group and the transition happened rather smoothly. While Girls' Nite started out to address issues of depression its original goals did not appeal to many of the young women of colour within the school walls. As the program began to create controversy and deal with issues of resistance and talk about issues of gender oppression, the program became more appealing to the young women of colour within the school. The second Girls' Nite included a larger number of young women of colour and by the third Girls' Nite, the number of young women of colour at the sleep over and participating in the events was disproportionately larger than the number of students of colour at Westside High.

The fact that Girls' Nite became a place for the active young women of colour in the school to turn their attention should not be seen as accolades for the program as much as a lack of programming for students of colour at Westside High. Issues of race and racialization were often ignored by the administration and many members of the staff at Westside High and Girls' Nite became an outlet for the young women of colour within the school who were struggling or wishing to seek out and understand issues of identity and identification. Due to the small number of teachers who worked to make Westside High a more equitable space of schooling meant that because Jill and I were seen to do this work, we were deemed "safe" by the students of colour who were seeking an outlet of expression within the school. Thus, by default, Girls' Nite became a place to inquire about and challenge ideas of privilege and oppression.

¹⁹ All the members of the African Canadian Students Club were female students.

Girls' Nite was not designed to address issues of race and racialization. Yet, the emergence of anti-oppression at the core of its agenda Girls' Nite gave students of colour a place to begin to challenge white girl about their positions of privilege. Just as Girls' Nite pushed the male students of the school to begin to question their privilege in terms of gender, the young women of colour were also able to push the white girls in the program to begin to question and acknowledge their white privilege. This led to an acknowledgement of white privilege and recognition of the intersections of identity by the white Girls' Nite Girls in a way that may not have been possible without the common experiences of girlhood setting the groundwork for discussion and communication.

Marcia noted this when she said:

I have learned so many other things stemming from Girls' Nite. I have learned so much in terms of social justice and racism and sexuality fluidity and feminism and all of that. Girls' Nite has helped because as you or at least as I took part in Girls' Nite I eventually branched out into these other things that I needed to look at. I seriously think it all came from that. It is easier when you have a community. It was easier because I felt like I had a group of people that understood me, understood what I was about.

The student population was overly represented by middle to upper class white students. Through the resistive nature of Girls' Nite, the program was able to open up conversations about privilege that, as Marcia said, "stemmed" out to other areas of privilege. This meant that the ideas of privilege in whatever form they were carried by students at Westside began to be examined in ways that otherwise may have been left unmentioned or viewed differently if they had been addressed first by students of colour.

As Girls' Nite begins to move into other areas of oppression and privilege it has started to address notions of race and racialization and is slowly becoming a catch all place for students who want to speak out about oppression. Slowly these issues were being brought to the forefront by the students of colour who have found a space at Girls'

Nite to begin to challenge ideas of privilege and race. In the future, if Girls' Nite wants to have the transformative impact that it hopes to have in order to create a more equitable space of schooling at Westside High it needs to ensure that it continues to push both the male and female students to examine other areas of oppression, domination and privilege.

“They feel powerful when they are mean”: A questionable enactment of power

As was discussed in the previous chapter, through the process of Girls' Nite the girls began to embody and exercise power in ways that had previously been unknown to them. The exercising of this power was not always easy to watch, as was demonstrated by the opening words of this thesis. Some of the girls, such as Melody, chose ways to express this newfound ideas about power in ways that proved highly controversial and often hurtful to others in the school. As a result these particular girls were often looked down upon as an example of Girls' Nite gone wrong by many staff and students at the school. However, the very people who voiced objection to the way that these girls enacted their newfound power were also the same people who had the most to lose if a shift in the power structure of Westside High was truly going to occur. Rather than view these girls as examples of “power corrupting” or “power gone wrong”, they demonstrate how effective Girls' Nite was at opening up new expressions of power to the young women of Westside High and challenging prevailing notions about the embodiment of gender and the enactment of gendered power.

Foucault and many scholars since (Ellsworth, 1992; Butler, 1993; Lather, 2001) have argued that regulation and oppression can occur not only through the shutting down of voices, but also through invoking them. At Westside, many teachers pride themselves on the notion of education being an emancipatory vehicle through which young people

can better themselves and their circumstances in life. As the young women in this study began to feel more comfortable with their new ideas about power, two of them began to embody and enact this power in ways that proved troublesome for two reasons. The first was that the ways these young women chose to enact their power was done in a way that did not fall in line with gendered expectations of expressions of power. The second reason was that the way the girls were enacting power proved to be threatening to many of the traditional power holders at Westside High.

While each of the girls expressed power in ways that proved difficult to swallow for many members of the Westside community, Andrea and Melody chose ways that proved to be the most controversial and difficult for the entire Westside community, including the other Girls' Nite girls. An example of this is found at the beginning of this thesis, with Melody screaming and yelling hurtful and derogatory remarks at performers during a school-wide talent show. Melody's threatening enactments of power are also found in the statement below in which she discusses how Girls' Nite has given her the confidence to begin to address issues of sexual harassment with boys:

I heard this guy telling one of his friends that this girl in grade nine was a slut. I turned around and walked right up to him, I got all in his face and I said, "uh-uh, no way, you do not get to talk about girls in this school that way. What do you know about that girl? Do you know how bad it is for you to say stuff like that?" He called me a bitch and I told him I would kick his ass. I told him that if I heard that he was saying stuff like that again then I would for sure kick his ass and watch out. Then I went and found the girl and I told her that he was saying this stuff and I told her that I had her back if she wanted to do anything about it.

Andrea also enacted her power in ways that made others in the school uncomfortable.

She reiterates her feelings in the following statement:

I got so sick of Tom just being such an ass to the girls in class and playing that boys stick together thing, I freaked out one day and I called him on it. I totally set him up in class by doing something that he would have brushed off as okay boy behaviour and then when he got mad at me in his stupid sarcastic way I

called him out and yelled at him in class and told him he was sexist and that I was onto him and that he better figure out how to act differently or I was going to report him.

Finally, there was one female teacher that both Melody and Andrea felt rewarded girls who acted in traditionally subservient ways in class, and together they decided to point this out to this teacher. They both reiterated this story in their interviews and the teacher involved reminded me of it when I was back at the school collecting data. In an effort to educate this teacher, Andrea and Melody approached her after class one day, and she did not respond well to their observations. In fact, she told them that she did not approve of their behaviour in school and believed that they were bullies and she would not do anything in her classroom that promoted or approved of the behaviour of these two girls.

This story is representative of how many of the teachers in the school responded to Andrea and Melody when they began to enact their new definition of power throughout the school. During my stay at the school numerous teachers referred to these two girls as “undisciplinable”, “the school bullies” and “absolute bitches”. These teachers are also the same teachers who are caught up in a traditional hierarchical notion about power and schooling. They did not believe it was the girls’ place to criticize their teaching practise and in the past these teachers had not been responsive to any student criticizing their teaching. Melody and Andrea created an obvious target for these teachers and the way that they chose to enact their power allowed these teachers to dismiss their criticism as “bullying” or “bitchiness”. The reaction of these teachers as well as other power holders in the school brings to mind the opening quote of this chapter. Prior to Girls’ Nite, these teachers espoused the power of education to empower

students; however, once the girls expressed power in a way that threatened the power of these teachers, then the tune of empowerment was quickly changed.

When I was back generating data for this project, Jill and I attempted to open a discussion with Melody and Andrea about their choices for enacting and embodying power. I gave them a copy of Freire's (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed in an attempt to have them begin to analyse their own behaviour and the ways that some of it may relate to continuing the cycle of oppression they were attempting to end. Andrea did not read the book and Melody read only parts of it. I don't take their disinterest in Freire as a sign of disinterest in the conversation. Even I find Freire inaccessible at times and I am a Freire addict. Melody, Jill and I were able to have brief discussions about how some of her behaviour mirrored the behaviour of the very people she was attempting to change.

In reflecting on these conversations during her interview Melody stated:

In those talks you told me that some girls didn't want to come to GN directly because of me. I didn't understand what you were saying at first, I didn't understand. I was thinking, maybe it is better if I don't go. So I had to take a long think and a long look at myself and the way that I speak and act towards people and I mean, yeah. Yeah, maybe I was not having the kind of impact I wanted to have, so I had to think about that. But I also know that people were talking about a girl being powerful and the first place they go with it was "bitch" or "bully". I think they need to think about their expectations of how they want girls to behave. They all go off spouting "Girl Power", well, careful girls, if you show you have power, like real power that is not wrapped up in some bullshit Barbie pink "love yourself because you are a woman" crap, then you are really going to get shit on. I took a long look after those talks and I know I need to address some stuff, but I am not going to change my message and my intention. It is still going to come out of all of me all the time.

Andrea and Melody's actions, the way particular staff and students responded to them and Melody's words in her interview demonstrate the complexities involved with this kind of work. It would be easy to view these two girls as examples of "power corrupting" or "girls gone wrong", but Melody brings up a good point when she talks of

liberal expectations surrounding female, specifically female student, empowerment programs. As a staff advisor to this program, Andrea and Melody forced me to stand back and question what my hopes and desires were for this program. By not allowing these girls the space to question, examine and alter their positions of power within the school, we ran the risk of limiting the possibilities of Girls' Nite to be the disruptive and transgressive program that we espoused it to be. Andrea and Melody proved to be one of the most complicated aspects of this program and their actions still evoke great debate amongst Jill, Alison, myself and the other girls.

Despite their sometimes questionable actions, I believe Andrea and Melody demonstrate the ability of Girls' Nite to provide girls with the space necessary to critically question expectations of gender and take up new ways of being in response to this questioning. Through their questionable enactment of power, these two girls may represent the embodiment of the goal of Girls' Nite, to get the young women of the school to question gender expectations and make choices in their daily lives to enact their power in ways that disrupt gender domination rather than continue to exist within it. Andrea and Melody challenged the boys in the school in ways that truly threatened the one way the boys knew how to hold onto power in the school, through physical force. In classrooms these two girls began to act in ways that had traditionally been reserved for boys, by taking up a lot of physical space, publicly criticizing teachers and refusing to act in ways traditionally expected and rewarded for female students. Through their "questionable" embodiment of power, Andrea and Melody forced all of us at Westside High to question what we meant when we said that we wanted girls to feel and act in ways that made them feel powerful.

“It made me feel less crazy”: Schools as sites for social change

Discussions of critical feminist pedagogy continue to highlight the difficulties involved in challenging gender relations (Davies 1989 and 1993; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Kenway & Willis 1997a; Walkerdine 1990a). Given the complexities involved in the construction of femininity and the power and pervasiveness of gender ideologies at personal and social levels, it is not surprising that effective challenges are difficult to identify and put into practice. Reconstructing femininity in new ways is difficult because it involves not only deconstructing dominant ideologies, but also confronting investments in normative discourses of femininity. Throughout this chapter I have attempted to examine areas of concern that exist within the Girls' Nite program. In some cases I have attempted to address these areas of concern, in others I have left the concern open, representing the unanswered questions of Girls' Nite. As I have demonstrated, there are many reasons to criticise Girls' Nite, however in these critiques, we must not lose sight of the power of a school-based program to challenge the constructions of femininity and power and pervasiveness of gender ideologies. Girls' Nite is an example of a school-based space in which the female students could express and value their own experiential knowledge and move toward creating a more gender friendly school. Through this critical space, the girls at Westside High were able to use the space of schooling to create a dialogic community that recognized the inequalities of power while nurturing a community of support and communication. Girls' Nite and the words and images of the Girls' Nite girls demonstrate that schools can be places and space of social change.

Through its critical programming and alternative use of the space of schooling, Girls' Nite demonstrates that when used under the right conditions, schooling can in fact

be used to re-educate students and other members of school community about the power of gendered identity expectations. Through public scrutiny and the creation of a collective consciousness, Girls' Nite was able to re-invent the space of schooling to become a more gender friendly and gender safe space to be in for both the male and female students of the school. Through its creative use of space, the marginalised girls of the school were able to create a counter-public with which they could oppose harmful gender stereotypes and assert interpretations of their own shifting identities. Through the words and images of the Girls' Nite girls, we can see that Girls' Nite is a school-based program that intentionally challenged the reproductive nature of public schools and created a space in which the girls could define and challenge larger notions about them. Through utilizing the space of schooling for such disruptive programming, we can "gain distance from the given by abstracting it from its familiar surroundings and studying it in unfamiliar ways, until our perceptions of it and society are challenged" (Taylor 1987, p. 104) and as Shor (1987) writes, "help students to extra-ordinarily re-experience the ordinary" (p. 104). Programs such a Girls' Nite allow us to indulge the possibility of using schooling as a site for interrupting the sedimented gender hierarchies that schools are usually so complicit in producing and offers the possibility for students to become involved in producing new transgressive versions of gender relations. While most schools still reinforce gender hierarchies, Girls' Nite is an example of programming that can be run in schools to interrupt these gender dynamics. It demonstrates the ability of young women and to some extent young men, to engage in critically challenging the sedimented gender regimes of secondary schools and therefore altering the power regimes around and within schools.

Chapter Five

“I AM HELPING TO BUILD SOMETHING”: IDENTITY, POWER AND SCHOOLING

“They look at me with surprise, like they are surprised that I can actually do something.” -Andrea

“Before this, it would have been okay for me to be stupid, to be silent, to blend into the wall. No one would have said anything or expected more from me. But now they expect more from me. It is like they are surprised I can actually do something that matters.” -Marcia

“Yeah, but like at GN it changes because I feel like it is all safe everywhere and there isn’t anywhere that I don’t feel safe at GN”. -Rosa

“It saved me from being crazy. It allowed me to express myself as who I am. I know that I am going to feel okay about who am. I know that I am going to feel okay when I look back on high school and I will always know what it meant to that level of support.” -Melody

“If I am having a bad day and crying in the bathroom, girls will come up to me and say, “Rachel, what’s wrong?” I am like, “you know my name, thank-you.” -Rachel

“It’s like a big hug in a place that was not always so embracing.” -Amber

“It just makes me feel more comfortable and more at home. More like this is a space that I can come to and be safe here. It just makes me feel more okay here.” - Sarah

“I feel like I have more of a purpose. I feel like I am actually doing something that can benefit people and will continue to benefit people after I leave. I am helping to build something that is really beneficial to the girls that will be here when I leave. I mean you can’t feel unnoticed if someone is stopping and saying, “hey how you doing? I don’t know you that well, but I met you and I want to get to know you better.” - Izzy

In the introduction to this thesis I set out a lengthy task list. I said I was going to talk about schooling and girls and power and how these subjects intersected and influenced each other through a school-based gender awareness program entitled “Girls’ Nite”. I also stated that I would examine the way current research methodologies left both me and the girls craving a different way of doing research together and the way that we attempted to address this hunger for more disruptive and girl-centered research methodologies. I stated that I was hoping that through an examination of the Girls’ Nite program, through the perspective of the young women involved in the program, we could

better understand the way schools could be used as sites for social change. Through this examination, I hoped that I could demonstrate some of the positive and disruptive ways that teachers and students are working “against the grain” (Cochran- Smith, 1991) to transform their own schooling experiences. Finally, I stated that I would do all this through attempting to answer the research question, “How do the Girls’ Nite girls feel that their involvement in the Girls Nite program has influenced their gendered identity formation during secondary school?” Throughout this final chapter of the thesis, I will review the information I have presented throughout this document in an attempt to address the promises made at the beginning of this thesis while attempting to connect how all the information given throughout the document connects to the research question stated in the opening chapter.

Power and Identity: The ability to negotiate the discursive self

Ideas about power and identity have been presented throughout this thesis. In chapter two, during the theoretical framework section I talked about how power and discourse intermingle to influence the identity formation of the girls within this study in a secondary school setting. In chapter three, through an examination of the resistance the girls faced while organizing the first Girls’ Nite, the limits of discourse on the identity choices for the young women in this study were discussed. We also saw how the Girls’ Nite program responded to this resistance and gave the girls a space of their own to develop a critical literacy (Davies, 1997) about the way that discourse was influencing the gendered identity choices available to the girls within this study. This space allowed the girls to exist within the school setting in a way that they had never experienced before. With the absence of both staff and male surveillance, the young women began to

embody power in ways that had been previously unavailable to them. Through this experience the young women developed a desire to recognize and understand how power influenced their gendered identity choices and how they could counter these influences in ways that would prove more beneficial to their everyday school life. It was in addressing these concerns and curiosities that the Girls' Nite program transformed Westside High into a place where the girls felt they developed a change in the way power influenced their gendered identity.

What is most important to note about the Girls' Nite program is that according to the girls, it has not altered the structure of the school nor do they believe that it should. However, the girls are adamant that Girls' Nite has made the space and place of schooling safer place for young women and even young men. For example, as noted in chapter 3, the girls feel there is a marked decrease in the occurrence of sexual harassment in the hallways of Westside High. They also feel that if some form of harassment is played out, a support network exists within the school that allows them to address the issue with the support of other female and male students within the school. Also, as noted in chapters 3 and 4, the girls feel more confident in recognizing and approaching teachers who may be encouraging a learning environment that rewards emphasized femininity. Finally, through the critical space provided by Girls' Nite, the girls feel that they are able to understand how enacting these gendered identity expectations ultimately limits their choices and options as women, no matter how much they get rewarded, whether it be through increased attention from male students or increased approval from teachers. Ultimately for the girls, this means increased choices for gender performance

and increased awareness around the influence of discourse on their gendered identity formation.

The girls felt that Girls' Nite cannot alter the way that girls are positioned within the discourses of gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality. However through Girls' Nite the girls felt that they discovered how they were discursively shaped and that their choices as young women were not limited to a fixed state of femininity or biology. Through this understanding the girls felt that they became aware of their own ability to navigate and enact performances that they felt were more beneficial to them. Davies (1991) notes that:

Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognize multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity. (p.51)

Davies exemplifies the way that the Girls' Nite program influenced the gendered identity formation of the girls within this study. Through the critical space provided by the program, the girls discovered that while they could not always escape the discursive constraints placed on them, they did learn to navigate them in ways that they felt provided them with more choices and options as women than were previously available to them. The girls also discovered that in particular moments of gender performance, they did have the ability to disrupt the discursive expectations of gender and power. We saw examples of this through the way the girls responded to the resistance they felt in organizing the Girls' Nite program and a reclaiming of the terms often used to limit and hurt them, such as pillow fight, pornfest and lesbian. The girls felt that this awareness gave them the power and choice to move within and through these discourses in ways

that they felt were more advantageous to them rather than to the traditional power holders within the school setting.

Finally, the girls felt that through their involvement in Girls' Nite, they learned to expect more from their male friends and develop relationships with these friends that were not based on a perpetual power imbalance. In chapter 3 we saw that through the Young Men's and Young Women's discussion group, the male and female students of the school were able to understand the influence they played in limiting the gendered identity choices available and determined that they would build relationships that were not based on limited choices and power relations. Through unpacking the way that they were influencing each other's gendered identity choices, the boys and girls involved in these discussion groups learned to support each other in their attempts to develop relationships that existed within a more equitable power scale. The girls within this study learned to expect and demand more from themselves and their male friends in terms of how both genders could enact their identity within the school setting.

The girls involved in this study feel that their involvement in Girl's Nite has influenced their gendered identity formation in a number of ways. Girls' Nite gave them an awareness of the performativity of gender, allowing them to critically think about and choose how they want to enact these performances within their school setting. Girls' Nite allowed the girls the space to recognize and understand the power of discourse to shape their gender choices. In chapter 4 we saw how this has led Melody, Marcia and Sarah to recognize how discourse shapes other intersections of identity and therefore influenced their identity formation in secondary schooling beyond just gender. Finally through this increased awareness in performance and discourse, the girls in this study

developed the ability to question traditional power structures in the school setting and demand more from the traditional power holders in the school whose identity was vested in maintaining inequitable power relations. Overall the young women feel that Girls' Nite created a space within Westside High that made them more critically aware of how their identity is shaped for them and therefore given them more ability and power to determine how they will enact their gender in their everyday lives.

What about the boys? Gender, power, identity and schooling

As I read through the entire thesis finding common themes and points for my conclusion, I was struck that one of the few common themes to make it into every chapter in this thesis was boys. In chapters 1 and 3 I talked at length about how the boys' resistance shaped the disruptive and transformative nature of the Girls' Nite program. I also talked about how the response of girls to a gender awareness program instigated a discussion group for boys to begin to unpack both the expectations of masculinity as well as the reasons for their often hostile responses to the Girls' Nite program. In chapter 4 I talked about how the program elicited classroom discussions in which boys were encouraged to question the influence of masculinity in their own gender choices. In a thesis that is about a single-sex program, boys seem to have woven their way into a large part of the discussion. In retrospect, given the reliance of hegemonic masculinity on emphasized femininity to maintain power structures (Connell, 2002), this should not have been surprising to me.

In regards to this thesis, there are two possible implications to the presence of boys at every point of discussion. In 2000 The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men was published by Christina Hoff Sommers. In

this book the author launches a striking attack on how the girls agenda has harmed the education of boys and ultimately it is “the boys, not girls, who display signs of educational and social disadvantage” (p. 5). This book is representative of the numerous arguments made that girls’ educational success is happening at the expense of boys and that we need to refocus our attention to ensure that boys do not wither into dark academic corners. These arguments often focus on national educational statistics that state girls are outperforming boys in various educational subjects. As critical consumers of this information, we must look deeper into these statistics and understand that a zero-sum model to gender concerns in education is not the answer to gender inequity. For example, Hoff Sommers chooses a rather arbitrary indicator that clouds the reality that girls still remain educationally and more importantly economically disadvantaged after graduating from high school. She states, “between 1982 and 1992 the proportion of women aged 15-69 years with post secondary school qualifications increased from 26% to 37%” (p. 122). However, found within the same table, what Hoff Sommers leaves out is that over the same period the equivalent proportion for men increased from 38% to 47% (AAUW 1998, p. 17). In presenting a table from an AAUW follow-up study on the position of boys and girls in schools, that shows that girls lag behind boys in percentages in taking calculus, physics, chemistry, engineering and astronomy at high school levels, Hoff Sommers reports, “Inequity can (and does) work in both directions” (p. 167). Unfortunately for Hoff Sommers and the many like her who argue with such unidirectional focus, it doesn’t seem to occur to her that both boys and girls face significant problems related to their genders that need to be addressed.

Fortunately for girls and boys, there is a burgeoning amount of feminist critiques on the simplistic nature of studies such as Hoff Sommers. Recognizing the complexity around issues of gender and schooling, these critiques go beyond the static head counts that informed much of this “what about the boys?” work. Research such as the Kenway *et al* (1997a) *Answering back*, the Gilberts' (1998) *Masculinity goes to school*, Lingard and Douglas (1999) *Men engaging feminsims* , write from a position in which gender emerges as a product of the range of discursive practices available at any one site. These authors emphasize the performativity and social constructionist approaches espoused by Butler and Connell. They also recognize that gender is inevitably interwoven with power differentials and their work has revealed the various plays within which those differentials are brought to bear on the individual students and teachers who comprise the community of schooling.

This sort of sophisticated theorizing is notably absent from the boys-in-education movement, whose publications and reports appear more similar to the head counts and scare quotes in the popular press (Gill & Starr, 2000). The idea of sharing 'turns' about educational investment and focus, of engaging in a zero-sum game in evaluating schooling (a game that comes down to a gain either for girls and against boys, or for boys and against girls) is both simplistic and dangerous (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). These authors have described issues of schooling and gender in terms of the dynamic ongoing everyday process of life in schools and have used theories of gender to inform their analyses of what is going on. The research base offered by the boys-in-education lobby appears to consist of numbers of boys failing to reach required standards, suspended from classes and/or school, discovered involved in anti-social activity; even suicide numbers

are called to support this cause. These issues are serious ones and do require attention, however, if they are presented as boys' issues which require specific attention to be re-directed from the girls, then it is unlikely the programs will lead to genuine reforms and more likely that we will see a reversion to demonstrably inequitable schooling practices.

Preferring to take note of the way critical feminist scholars have framed the gender debate within schools, the constant presence of boys throughout this thesis indicates that if we are going to do this work with girls, we also need to do this work with boys. The presence of boys, popping up at every opportunity within this thesis, demonstrates how complexly interconnected femininity, masculinity, power and schooling are. If we want to improve the position of girls in schools, we need to find ways to address issues of masculinity with the boys. As was briefly discussed in chapter 4, traditional notions of masculinity are wrapped up in notions of toughness and violence or the implicit threat of it, and this has a tremendous impact on both young men and young women. Boys and men have a huge stake in looking critically at the way discourse shapes and creates gendered identity choices. As educators and researchers we must work toward creating spaces where boys can learn to make sense of the way that discourse shapes their gendered identity choices in order to allow them to make different choices that are better for both themselves and for girls. In chapter 4, the girls discussed the way that the single-sex space provided them with room to begin ultimately ask bigger questions about discourse. Providing boys with this space could mean that ultimately we begin discussing what we should know to reduce gender inequity and encourage respectful relationships between people.

What is needed is a re-envisioning of the meaning of gender equity - in terms of achieving an educational environment in which all young people feel free to engage in a range of activities and expect a range of achievements that are not marked by gender. There is a need to begin the gender equity discussion with talk of gender order, gender regime, gender politics and gender dynamics to refer to the ways in which people and their institutions perform gender. Hopefully, this would save us from being drawn into fruitless comparisons regarding boys' versus girls' achievement.

More questions, fewer answers: Areas of future research

Research is always incomplete and partial and in this thesis I do not attempt to speak for all girls. What I do hope is that I provide an example of multiply located young women, rich, poor, white, mixed race, mixed sexuality, collaboratively discussing their gender issues within a secondary school setting and the challenges and opportunities created by such a venture. I do not want someone to walk away from reading this document and viewing the girls' films thinking that they know how to implement such a program in another secondary school or that they now know how young women make sense of their gendered identity formation in secondary school. This study is partial and situated within the experience of the Girls' Nite Girls at Westside High. I do hope that this research will demonstrate the importance and possibilities of working with girls and boys on issues of gender and that this work will encourage disruptive and transformative discussions on identity, particularly within the space of schooling.

Within the realm of anti-oppressive educational research, we need to expand beyond the traditional reproduction theory to recognize the power of schools. We must not lose sight of the way schools perpetuate, legitimize and reproduce widespread

structural inequalities; we must also provide examples of moments of disruption within these regimes. Girls' Nite and the various programs that have spun off of the Girls' Nite program provide an example of the ability and capability of doing this work within the confines of the space and place of schooling. Girls' Nite is struggling for existence this year. I have stepped away from my long distance supervisory role, Jill has taken a leave from Westside to teach in another country, and, as I write this last paragraph, Alison is awaiting the birth of her first child, a little girl. As the three of us moved on from Westside, the program began to falter and lose steam. Alison knew she would not be at the school until the end of the school year and could not find another teacher to take on the project. All three of us are inundated with emails from other female students at the school seeking advice on how to run the program in the absence of a supportive teacher. Michael, the teacher who facilitated the Young Men's Discussion Group is also on leave this year, also teaching abroad. As a result, the Young Men's Discussion Group has fallen to the wayside. Michael also reports that he is inundated with emails from the boys he worked with last year who continue to question the limits of masculine expectations on their daily lives. This demonstrates the importance of providing schools with teachers who are critical about issues of social location and providing research that enables schools and teachers to provide the groundwork necessary for anti-oppressive teachers who want to do this work in schools. Research that illuminates the inequities perpetuated by schools should be balanced with research that illuminates the possibilities of schooling so that young teachers have strong examples of theory in practise. Programs such as Girls' Nite and Young Men's Discussion Group should be the norm, not the exception

and educational research needs to start providing examples of these programs so that they can indeed become the norm.

Finally, as girl studies begins to find its place within academic research, we must ensure that we situate research in places that matters most to the girls and begin to understand the significance that schooling has on the lives of girls. We must start to understand how and why girls make the choices they do in school instead of writing about the consequences of these choices. Girls' Nite provides an example of schooling that meant something to the girls. In educational research we need to start focussing on schooling that means something to marginalized students and attempts to understand what makes that important. Within these research projects on what matters most to girls, feminism and girl studies research needs to walk its talk and firmly situate girls and their ideas in the centre of research about them. When I set out to have the girls' voices seen and heard more clearly within this research, I faced many stumbling blocks. As was discussed at length in chapter 2, finding a way to situate the girls firmly within the centre of this research meant navigating the academic field on my own, figuring it out on my own. I had the support of a tremendous advisory committee who cheered me along, helped me counter unfriendly research practises and supported me through the creation of "academically rigorous" but girl friendly research methods. I would have preferred to have more of the girls within this research; however, just the process of the films and the co-coding took months. By the time the actual writing up of this research started, I was well into the third year of my MA studies. In an academic era where we are pushed and encouraged to do things faster, girl studies research needs to find ways to co-construct research with girls that are meaningful to them in order to ensure that we are not further

victimizing or silencing the girls by constructing discourse about them that actually limits their choices through proclamations of “representative” research.

Throughout this research we struggled with the amount of information we had, how do we choose what to put in these documents? What ended up in this document is such a small sampling of the powerful points made by these young women throughout this research. As I write this I am surrounded by piles of data collected by me and the girls about their lives and the Girls’ Nite program. I am surrounded by piles, files, cds and dvds in my very cramped workspace that represent mountains of information not found within this text. Feminist poststructural scholarship helped me to navigate these choices by recognizing that all information is partial and situated and that no matter how many pages I included or didn’t include, there would never be a complete study, there would always be more. This document, the words on the pages, the images in the films, sit like some kind of historical record of the identity choices the girls were making while I generated data, but that does not ensure that they are still enacting the same choices in identity. In the end, this thesis will be bound and remain static as the lives and opinions of these girls remains dynamic, shifting and moving.

Where are they now, what are they doing? How much of the program has remained with them as they move beyond the cocoon of Westside and into new worlds and new social orders? How much of these identities and these identity claims still exist? I last saw the girls scrambling through the hallways of Westside High as they frantically tried to successfully complete both the educational requirements that come with high school graduation and the emotional ones as well. When I talked to them during their interviews about the lessons from Girls’ Nite they would take with them in the next

chapter of their lives, they provided me with various answers. Some were looking forward to the chance to continue their work in academically sanctioned ways, such as through taking women's studies courses or feminist history courses. Others mentioned that they will remember to question gender expectations, even when they are not participating in the official discussions sanctioned by the Girls' Nite programming. Melody mentioned that she will be able to look back at her high school and feel okay with who she is because of the support she received through Girls' Nite. The answers varied just as greatly as the girls themselves. Over the course of the last year, I have corresponded over the phone and on email with them, some more than others and all for various reasons. These girls have indeed all moved on from the hallways of Westside High, they are all pursuing post-secondary education at various institutions in various areas of study across the country. I have not had a chance to ask them directly how they see their experiences with Girls' Nite influencing their daily lives now that they are separated and no longer carrying out these discussions on a regular basis. As their teacher, as a woman, I can hope that they have not lost sight of the powerful young women that they were growing to be and that they all "feel okay" about who they are.

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