

**The wellbeing of Year 13 girls in  
high-decile, high performing  
single-sex secondary schools in  
New Zealand**

**Nicky Whitham-Blackwell**

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# ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to investigate the wellbeing of Year 13 girls in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools. It was based on a rationale that the wellbeing of this group of students is suffering, and that the three-year continuous assessment system – the National Certificate of Educational Achievement - in New Zealand secondary schools, comprising of both internal and external assessments, is adding to the lack of balance in their lives. Worldwide there exists an increasing concern about the wellbeing of high school students. In tandem, there is a growing focus on achievement as students compete for places in universities, and schools compete for students. Many parents make decisions about their children’s high school education based on achievement data from schools. What seems to be missing is a focus on the holistic needs of young people, what we in New Zealand call ‘hauora’. Overseas literature suggests that students in high socio-economic communities are the most vulnerable when it comes to stress and anxiety, with high performing girls’ schools at the top of that list. Based on the current literature from the New Zealand context, the wellbeing of school students as a topic, apart from some emerging government documents, is notable by its absence.

This qualitative research project involved five focus groups and four interviews with a total of 22 participants across three different schools in two different cities in New Zealand. The study found that the experience of these students is one of almost constant stress and pressure, with significant social, emotional, physical and mental health consequences. This pressure is exacerbated by problems with inconsistencies in the administration and assessing of NCEA, by expectations from all sides - including from the school, their parents, their peers and themselves - and by overassessment and badly planned assessment timetables. The challenges for school leaders going forward are myriad. Ways need to be found to reduce the constant pressure on these students. In particular, attention needs to be paid to avoiding over-assessment, avoiding assessment clashes, and creating a culture where students feel supported, valued and understood. Expectations need to be monitored across subjects and across groups in these young women’s lives. Both teachers and parents need to be educated in the realities of these students’ experiences of school, and schools must make real efforts to listen to the voices of these students. It is necessary for both schools and the government to take action to alleviate the stress, pressure and anxiety that many of these students experience all too regularly.

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*He aha te mea nui o te ao*

*He tangata, he tangata, he tangata*

## ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ERO	Education Review Office
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCEA	National Certificate of Educational Achievement
NZCER	New Zealand Council for Educational Research
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's' Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background to the study

After working as the Year 13 Dean for five years in a high-decile, high performing girls' school, I have become aware of what appears to be a silent epidemic of mental health issues for some students in relation to the intense and constant pressure of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA);<sup>1</sup> New Zealand's national assessment system for students in Years 11, 12 and 13. The prevalence of these health issues is also noted by, amongst others, Luthar and Latendresse (2005); Pope (2001); Sadker and Zittleman (2004); Sharma and Sud (1990); and Skelton (2010). This literature confirms a link between wellbeing issues and assessment pressure.

This thesis research focuses on the wellbeing (hauora) of girls in high-decile, high performing, single-sex secondary schools in New Zealand. The Ministry of Education (MOE) defines wellbeing thus: "The concept of wellbeing encompasses the physical, mental and emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of health" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 31). This concept is also recognised by the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2016). Hauora is described in the same MOE document as "a Māori philosophy of health unique to New Zealand. It comprises taha tinana (physical wellbeing), taha hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing), taha whānau (social wellbeing), and taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing)" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 31).

The New Zealand government explains 'decile' as "a measure of the socio-economic position of a school's student community relative to other schools throughout the country" (Ministry of Education, 2016). For the purpose of this research, a high-decile

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<sup>1</sup> NCEA- this is the national qualification system recognised by employers, and used for selection to universities and polytechnics, both in New Zealand and overseas. Each year, students study a number of courses or subjects and in each subject skills and knowledge are assessed against a number of standards. When a student achieves a standard, they gain a number of credits. These credits can just be 'Achieved' credits, or they can be 'Achieved with Merit' or 'Achieved with Excellence'. Students must achieve a certain number of credits to gain an NCEA certificate. There are three levels of NCEA certificate, depending on the difficulty of the standards achieved. In general, students work through Levels 1-3 in years 11-13 of school. Individual subjects can be 'endorsed' with Merit or Excellence, and the whole certificate level can be endorsed with Merit or Excellence also.

school is one that is ranked Decile 9 or 10; in other words, from the highest socio-economic communities.

Despite thorough searching, no scholarly publications that define or even discuss what is meant by a ‘high performing’ school in New Zealand could be found. Although we do not have official ‘league tables’ in New Zealand, one of the only publically available descriptions of ‘high performing’ is that which is available in popular media, a prime example of which is *Metro* magazine. *Metro* and other publications such as the *New Zealand Herald*, give us de facto league tables in the form of feature articles usually titled something like ‘Best Schools in Auckland’. *Metro*, for example, gives a ‘gold standard’ rating to those schools that have outstanding results compared with other schools in similar deciles. For decile nine or ten schools, this appears to be an achievement percentage of over 75% of students for NCEA Level 3 and for University Entrance achievement (Wilson, 2014, 2015). Therefore, for this research, a ‘high performing’ school is defined here as one which meets that ‘gold standard’ of achievement.

Readings of past research (Hodge, McCormick, & Kagan, 1997; Lowe & Lee, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, 1995; Robertson, 2013) reveal three distinct themes in regard to the impact of assessment on student wellbeing. These themes are, in the first instance, that there are gender differences when it comes to the effects of assessment culture (Hodge et al., 1997; Onwuegbuzie, 1995; Sharma & Sud, 1990). Secondly, the literature suggests that student voice is crucial if we are to truly understand the lived experience of students in our schools (Duckett, Sixsmith, & Kagan, 2008; Mansfield, 2014). Thirdly, past research indicates that test anxiety, expectations, emotional engagement and school burnout all have implications for student wellbeing (Robertson, 2013; Skelton, 2010; Wang, Chow, Hofkens, & Salmela-Aro, 2015). Therefore, the research that this thesis reports on is focused on how the duration, continuous nature and intensity of New Zealand’s senior high school assessment system (NCEA) has implications for wellbeing issues, specifically in relation to girls in particular environments.

International research (Duckett et al., 2008; Lowe & Lee, 2008) in the area of assessment suggests that there is an increasing number of high-stakes tests in all jurisdictions around the world, as governments try to achieve recognised standards of

achievement for all students. For example, we have seen the proliferation of ‘league tables’ in the United Kingdom where individual schools are publicly compared and ranked (Duckett et al., 2008). In the United States, “the move toward higher standards and greater accountability has resulted in an increased level of testing in U.S. schools” (Lowe & Lee, 2008, p.231). It is posited that, as students are facing increased pressure (from their parents, their teachers, their peers, and indeed, from society as a whole) to succeed in examinations at earlier ages, it is imperative that we are aware “of the distress that may be experienced by ... adolescents as a result and implement provision for early interventions” (Locker & Cropley, 2004, p. 333). Although in New Zealand we do not have official league tables as in the UK and other countries, “assessment plays a major role in providing evidence for making judgements about the quality of student learning in the school” (Mutch, 2012, p. 381).

Finally, the importance of attaining authentic student voice is found in the literature concerned with effective educational research. Mansfield (2014) contends that “the student voice literature argues that including and honoring students’ perspectives yields richer, more authentic research results as well as a more democratic learning space that fosters positive student outcomes” (p. 393). If educators are to focus on learning about the wellbeing of students in high decile, high performing, single-sex girls’ schools, it is critical that they, according to Mansfield (2014) and Duckett et al. (2008), include student voice in their research.

There appears to be a gap in the evidence when it comes to investigating these themes in relation to New Zealand schools and New Zealand students. Furthermore, an assessment system that is unique in the world in its length and in its ‘constant’ nature, suggests a need for New Zealand data and New Zealand voices to inform this topic. Hence, this study aims to at least start to fill this gap in the current evidence and understanding, while giving voice and agency to this particular group of young women who participated in this research.

### **Methodology rationale**

Conducted by a woman researching young women in an educational context, this research falls under a social science umbrella and utilises a qualitative approach that is

paradigmatically feminist and critical. Grix (2002) states that “all research necessarily starts from a person’s view of the world, which itself is shaped by the experience one brings to the research process” (p. 179). In my case, because of the recurring pattern of distress I have witnessed in my students over the years, my ontological position is that there is a reality being experienced by girls in high performing single-sex schools that is affecting their mental health. My experience over five years with these young women is the perspective that I bring to the research process, along with my own personal history of high achievement and stress as a high school student.

In the feminist theory paradigm, the ontology is that the spiritual, physical and relational universe, including the notions of God, nature and humanity, are not separate but are intertwined indelibly (Grix, 2002). These ontologies are true for me as a woman and as someone who is acutely aware of the need for enhanced hauora of our young women who are in the upper levels of high schooling in New Zealand. Schools and society appear to measure only academic success, but I believe that there is so much more to be known about our students and their realities. This research aimed to uncover the multi-layered spheres of these young women’s lives, and to discover what happens when their ‘hauora’ is out of balance, and what causes this imbalance. This research is critical in that it seeks to challenge the status quo and the traditional power bases in society - in this case, the institutions of high-decile secondary schools. The ontology of critical research is also concerned with change, challenge, action and empowerment (Doucet, Letourneau, & Stoppard, 2010), which is what I have aimed for in undertaking this study.

Campbell and Bunting (1991) describe the epistemology in feminist theory as acknowledging that “women’s experience can be a legitimate source of knowledge, women can be knowers, subjective data are valid, informants are ‘experts’ in their own lives, and knowledge is relational and contextual” (p. 7). In feminist theory, the epistemology is that personal knowledge is political knowledge, knowledge is female centred, and that the affective is just as important as the cognitive (Grix, 2002). Only the female students in my study can know what it is like to be a girl in a high performing single-sex school, experiencing the three year NCEA assessment system. It is their affective knowledge, and the consequences of it, that this study aimed to uncover. O’Reilly (2009) asserts that “a feminist methodology ... rests on an epistemological stance that says if you want to understand someone’s world, you have to

get inside it” (p. 69). So, in order to understand the realities of the young women in my study, I chose to ‘get inside’ their realities, and there are specific methodological approaches that are more conducive to this level of interaction. By using a critical feminist methodology, it is hoped that this study gave voice and agency to the young women participants.

Therefore, following on from past research, and the seeming gap in New Zealand data, the central research question guiding this study is:

What is the experience of young women in high decile, high performing single-sex girls’ secondary schools in relation to their own wellbeing when participating in the current National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessment system in New Zealand?

The sub-questions related to this are:

1. What are students’ understandings of the concepts of ‘balance’ and ‘wellbeing’ (or hauora) and how do they perceive themselves in relation to these values?; and
2. What school practices do students perceive help or hinder their wellbeing needs?

In order to answer these questions, nine different girls’ high-decile, high performing secondary schools in New Zealand were approached to participate in this study. Three out of these nine agreed to take part. Two were large state schools, and one was a state-integrated (Catholic) school. No private schools agreed to participate. Five focus groups were run within the three schools, comprising of between three and six Year 13 participants. From these focus groups, participants were invited to volunteer for an individual interview. Four interviews were conducted, one from School A, two from School B and one from School C. The findings from the focus groups were used in the final development of the semi-structured interview questions. The interview and focus group data were analysed using open coding in the first instance to identify common themes. Once this was done, axial coding was employed to identify the relationships among the open codes. This allowed the development of conceptual categories under which the findings were analysed.

## Setting the scene

In order to understand the core of this research, it is important to understand the term ‘wellbeing’. Wellbeing has become a keyword in social discourse in recent years. In particular, it has gained weight in the context of education and its presence is seen as a panacea for many of the issues facing our young people in the twenty-first century (McLeod & Wright, 2015). However, attempts over the years to define ‘wellbeing’ have been fraught with difficulty and the “question of how wellbeing should be defined (or spelt) still remains largely unresolved” (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012, p. 222). In a paper entitled ‘The challenge of defining wellbeing’, Dodge et al. (2012) come to the conclusion that the best definition for wellbeing “is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge” (p. 230). The New Zealand government, in its statistical research *The New Zealand general social survey*, measures wellbeing as a factor of an “individual’s perceptions of their life” (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). This appears to follow the conclusion that Shin and Johnson (1978) made almost forty years ago - that wellbeing is “a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his own chosen criteria” (p. 478). It is important to understand what is meant by ‘quality of life’. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines quality of life as:

An individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person’s physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment. (World Health Organisation, 2016)

Therefore, wellbeing is seen globally as broad ranging self-evaluation of an individual’s physical, psychological, values, social and environmental health. This study aims to discover what the participants self-perceived quality of life is.

When it comes to education in New Zealand, the first commonly acknowledged use of the word ‘wellbeing’ was in the curriculum document *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) where the concept is described as encompassing “the physical, mental and emotional, social, and spiritual

dimensions of health” (p. 31). Equally important in any discussion of wellbeing in a New Zealand context is the Māori philosophy of health known as ‘hauora’ (‘hau’ meaning the vital essence or vitality of a person; and ‘ora’ meaning to be alive, well, safe, cured, recovered, healthy, fit, healed) (Moorfield (2011). Hauora, as described before, and as described in Mason Durie’s (1998) *Whare tapa wha* model, is comprised of four pillars: taha tinana - physical wellbeing; taha hinengaro - mental and emotional wellbeing; taha whanau - social wellbeing; and taha wairua - spiritual wellbeing. The *Whare tapa wha* model helps us understand the interrelatedness of the four dimensions - as in a whare, or house, each wall depends on the other three for strength, symmetry and stability. It is these last two definitions of wellbeing that are commonly understood in education in New Zealand today, and are therefore the definitions that are used in this research. Although we have clear guidelines from both these documents aimed at schools about wellbeing and hauora, this study will attempt to discover whether this balance and hauora is really evident in some of our highest performing schools.

Globally, youth wellbeing is being monitored in an increasing climate of alarm and concern about how young people are faring. In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched its *Better life initiative* (Boarini, 2011), which publishes regular reports of wellbeing for whole populations and particular groups, including young people. A report entitled ‘*The global youth wellbeing index*’ (Goldin, Patel, & Perry, 2014) provides an international ranking of youth wellbeing, undertaken by the United States (US) based *Center for strategic and international studies* (CSIS), in association with the *International youth foundation* (IYF). The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) also publishes league tables on the wellbeing of children in some of the world’s advanced economies, with the aim of encouraging the “monitoring of children’s wellbeing, to permit country comparisons, and to stimulate debate and the development of policies to improve children’s lives” (UNICEF, 2007). This study is part of that process of debate and will hopefully lead to better policies, both at the government level and at the individual school level.

Apart from New Zealand government based research here, it appears that there has been no academic research on the wellbeing of students in our secondary schools. There has certainly, until now, been no research on the wellbeing of girls in high-decile, high

performing single-sex schools. The results of this study may therefore be of benefit to leaders in these types of schools as we all pay more attention to the wellbeing of the students in our classrooms and our schools.

## **Organisation of the study**

This thesis consists of six chapters. Following this chapter, Chapter 2 reviews extant literature and research that underpins and generates the research questions addressed in this thesis. It also reviews some major findings from empirical research studies concerning the wellbeing of students in schools in high socio-economic communities. Gaps in previous research are subsequently identified.

Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach adopted in this study. In order to obtain “rich” and “thick” data, (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129) a qualitative, critically feminist research design was utilised; justification for this approach is provided. The major research instruments – focus groups and semi-structured interviews - are identified and the procedures followed in collecting and analysing data are explained. The participants in the study are introduced in this chapter and ethical considerations are discussed.

Key findings from an analysis of the research data are presented in Chapter 4. These include content analysis of the results derived from the rich qualitative data gathered using the focus group and semi-structured interview techniques. This chapter is divided into two parts; the first part summarises the focus group data, and the second part summarises the interview data.

Chapter 5 includes a detailed account and interpretation of the findings of the study, with reference to the research questions and in relation to previous relevant research findings. This allows the identification of key themes, commonalities and differences between the participants and schools.

Conclusions and recommendations are made in Chapter 6. The implications of the findings are considered. This chapter also addresses the limitations of this current study, and makes suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature that I have examined in regard to the wellbeing of senior high school students in the context of ‘high stakes’ assessment. Abbott (2014) defines ‘high-stakes’ assessment as “any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability”. It discusses literature that describes the types and sources of stress for these students, including the demands of completing school work at home, expectations from significant others and themselves, and a growing pressure to succeed. This chapter also focuses on what the literature suggests are the issues for students in what we in New Zealand call ‘high-decile’ schools, and which other Western cultures call schools in ‘privileged’ communities. Themes that emerge from the literature include: the effect of school and assessment on wellbeing; types, triggers and effects of stress; gender differences; the specific problems for ‘privileged’ schools and their students; and the importance of student voice.

### Schools and wellbeing

A significant body of literature exists that is concerned with the concept that schools are increasingly places that negatively affect students’ wellbeing (Locker & Cropley, 2004; Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013; Nordmo & Samara, 2009; Rainey, 2013). This school-related negative affect, or stress, is suggested to emanate from the “unswerving orientation to individual advancement” (Demerath, 2009, p. 2) and the high expectations of parents, teachers, peers and communities (Hardy, 2003). In his book *Overburdened and Overwhelmed*, Hardy (2003) also suggests that the size of schools these days and their “impersonal atmosphere(s) might be adding to students’ stress” (p. 23). This demographic group of high-school aged students in Western cultures has been labeled by Sontag (2002) as “generation stress” with increases noted in numbers of high school students who take anti-depressants and attempt to commit suicide, a trend noted by several authors (Demerath, 2009; Hardy, 2003; Pope, 2001; Sontag, 2002). Although the issue of wellbeing for senior high school students in relation to high stakes assessment has been addressed in overseas literature, there appears to be an absence of research in this area in New Zealand. In addition, there appears to be no research

anywhere to date that I have been able to locate that addresses the specific confluence of the issues associated with assessment pressures in high-decile, high performing, single-sex girls' schools whose students are the focus of this research.

Both New Zealand and Australian governments have recently invested significantly in initiatives aimed at student wellbeing. In Australia the concept of wellbeing features throughout the document *The Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) which is the result of a joint agreement between the federal education Minister and the eight education Ministers of the states and territories. It states that:

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. Schools share this responsibility for wellbeing with students, parents, carers, families, the community, business and other education and training providers. (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008)

In New Zealand, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has launched its *Wellbeing at School Survey* (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016) which states that:

there are strong links between a student's mental and emotional wellbeing, their social behaviour and learning outcomes. Supporting students' wellbeing and social development goes hand in hand with meeting academic goals. An awareness of these links is important as this can help improve support for students with mental health issues. (p. 47)

This document goes on to say that although there has been some overall improvement since 2012 in how "secondary schools are supporting students' wellbeing", it seems that most of this involves collecting and tracking attendance and behaviour data over time, "rather than students' mental and emotional wellbeing" (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016, p. 62). The Educational Review Office's recommendation that is referenced in this report is that schools should "involve students more in

decisions that affect them at school” (as cited in New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016, p. 47).

However, the study of wellbeing of students has been limited in the case of Australia (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004), or seemingly non-existent in New Zealand. In 2009, Robinson, Alexander, and Gradisar (2009) noted the widespread concern in Australia about the wellbeing of Year 12 students, and noted that this concern was “rarely informed by research” (p. 59), suggesting that “reluctance by schools, parents and students to add research participation to other burdens has contributed to the absence of published empirical research about their subjective stress” (p. 60). Robinson et al. (2009) undertook research assessing final year students’ psychological stress and sleep patterns prior to an important externally assessed examination. They found that “a sizeable minority of students reported high levels of subjective stress, severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, and very inadequate sleep” (p. 59). It is important that we also have New Zealand data about these issues for our students.

The literature concerned with student wellbeing has long acknowledged the reality and impact of test anxiety on students (Locker & Cropley, 2004). This pattern in the literature also suggests that female students consistently report higher levels of anxiety and depression when assessed for test anxiety compared to males (Cole, Martin, Peeke, Seroczynski, & Fier, 1999; Hodge et al., 1997; Lowe & Lee, 2008; Robertson, 2013). One study examined test anxiety in a large group of students as they led up to their important final school examinations. They found that “a significant proportion of students were experiencing high levels of distress during this period, particularly females” (Locker & Cropley, 2004, p. 334). Importantly for this research, it has also been found that ‘girls only’ schools, and particularly those with well-established and consistently high records of achievement success, have the highest negative results for mood and distress (Lowe & Lee, 2008). Other research of note suggests that students can have high records of success, but be simultaneously emotionally disengaged and burnt out. For example, Wang et al. (2015) note that “students who are not engaged in school emotionally may be able to earn good grades, but they are at risk for poor mental health outcomes” (p. 64). Alongside this is the evidence that high achievers have a higher propensity to negative emotional health (Locker & Cropley, 2004; Robertson, 2013; Wang et al., 2015).

The idea that academic achievement expectations have mental health and wellbeing consequences for those students has also been addressed in overseas research. These expectations come externally from teachers, parents, and peers, and internally from students' own motivations. It has been found that expectations can have a negative effect on student emotion and overall anxiety (Duckett et al., 2008; Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010). Another idea that emerges in the literature around this topic is that of 'social derogation' which is "the fear associated with failing tests and the negative reactions of significant others (e.g., teachers, peers, or parents). The test taker fears the possibility that other key people will devalue him or her for poor test results" (Lowe & Lee, 2008, p. 233).

Most relevant for this study is the cadre of research conducted over the last decade in the United States by Suniya Luthar and colleagues, which has focused on the experiences and wellbeing of 'privileged' students in upper-middle class communities in that country. Luthar's research was the basis for the term 'affluenza'- described as "a metaphorical illness connoting hyper-investment in material wealth, among upper-middle class, white-collar families" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (Koplewicz, Gurain, & Williams, 2009, p. 1053). The common reaction when thinking about students in privileged schools is that there is no need to focus on these students because surely economic privilege reduces their risk of emotional and health issues; "that education and money procure well-being" (Luthar, 2013, p. 65). Although in the past money has buffered privileged youth against distress, this is no longer the case. Luthar asserts that "something fundamental has changed: The evidence suggests that the privileged young are much more vulnerable today than in previous generations" (Luthar, 2013, p. 65). Over a decade, Luthar and colleagues have studied why this is so, discovering that the evidence points to one cause; the unremitting "pressure for high octane achievement" (Luthar, 2013, p. 65). It seems that there have been relatively few studies which make suggestions about how schools can enhance the wellbeing of their students. The one message that has come through so far is that "social connectedness in adolescence is a better predictor of adult wellbeing than academic achievement" (Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016, p. 368).

### **Performativity**

New Zealand schools, teachers, leaders and students are operating under a blanket of performativity. According to Ball (2003) performativity is:

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change, based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. (p. 216)

In other words, performativity is a term used to describe what Ball calls society's 'obsession' with statistics, testing, grades, and goals. In the context of education in New Zealand there is evidence of performativity and its effects as school leaders push to increase the NCEA pass rates and endorsements, and teachers push their students to similarly strive for academic achievement-oriented success.

The literature concerned with assessment suggests that there is an increasing number of high-stakes tests in all jurisdictions around the world, as governments try to achieve recognised standards of achievement for all students. Overseas, there has been evidence of the proliferation of league tables. In the United Kingdom (UK) individual schools are publically compared and ranked (Duckett et al., 2008). In the United States, "the move toward higher standards and greater accountability has resulted in an increased level of testing in U.S. schools" (Lowe & Lee, 2008, p. 231). It is posited that, as students are facing increased pressure to succeed in examinations at an earlier and earlier age, it is imperative that we are aware "of the distress that may be experienced by young children and adolescents as a result and implement provision for early interventions" (Locker & Cropley, 2004, p. 333). This also implies the need for more services and support from schools and teachers. This is difficult, as "accommodating the 'personal' within school cultures increasingly dominated by 'performance' narratives, remains a problematic task" (Graham et al., 2016, p. 366).

The New Zealand government set out to address the perceived incidence of underachievement in our schools in the 1990s. Assessment became a key focus, where data could be used to make judgments about schools, and these judgments were made easier by the publication of NCEA results in *Metro* magazine, for example (Wilson,

2016). Although in New Zealand there are no official league tables as in the UK or other countries, “assessment plays a major role in providing evidence for making judgments about the quality of student learning in the school” (Mutch, 2012, p. 381). In addition, “parents, the media and the general public find ways of using publicly available information to make their own judgments ... popular magazines produce their own rankings based on scholastic results or a ‘value-added’ formula” (Mutch, 2012, p. 380). This contributes to the aforementioned culture of performativity that puts pressure on teachers and students to uphold or improve their school’s and their own individual results. This sense of performativity often results in experiences of negative affect or stress by students. Although the health and happiness of their children is of utmost importance to parents, “existing literature highlights that such aspirations have tended to be muted in schools, given the dominant emphasis on academic outcomes and workforce readiness” (Graham et al., 2016, p. 366).

## **NCEA**

When it comes to New Zealand’s qualification system, NCEA, the bulk of the literature originates in government documents and in the media. In 2015, the Education Review Office (ERO), published its document titled *Wellbeing for Young Peoples Success at Secondary School* (Education Review Office, 2015). The findings concluded that “students in all schools were experiencing a very assessment driven curriculum and assessment anxiety” (p. 29). It also concluded that “achieving academic success is a part of wellbeing but is not the only factor” (p. 29). Importantly, this report claimed that very few secondary schools were responding to the assessment overloading issues in ways that would help student wellbeing; for example, by changing their curriculum and assessment practices. In response to this report, Stephanie Greaney, ERO’s Evaluation Services Manager, said that schools are failing to look at assessment across the curriculum and are failing to embrace cross-curricular learning and assessment opportunities. She said “some teachers are deciding on assessments without knowing what other assessments the student has for that week. Well planned, considered assessment that takes a cross-curricular approach would reduce pressure for students and teachers” (Scoop Media, 2015).

In an interview on Radio New Zealand, Wellington Girls’ College Principal Julia Davidson commented that she had seen a dramatic rise in the incidence of anxiety,

eating disorders and other mental health issues over the last five years. This was, she believed, because “the weight of assessment is bearing down on [the students] to the point where learning has stopped being fun and assessment is driving everything they do” (Sziranyi, 2015). Stephanie Greaney went on to say in this interview that what ERO found in their report described above was that assessment is contributing to anxiety, that the students felt disempowered and that a large part of the problem was too many assessments happening at the same time. She said that the students thought that teachers didn’t recognise this issue, but that teachers did know about the issues of over-assessment and clashing assessments, but just didn’t know how to solve them (Sziranyi, 2015).

According to the NZCER published *NCEA in context*, students are working harder under NCEA than they did under previous qualification systems that were based on end-of-year exams. It re-iterates that schools are still doing too much assessment and that this puts relentless pressure on students throughout the year (Hipkins, Johnston, & Sheehan, 2016).

## **Stress**

It has long been acknowledged by science that some levels of stress can be adaptive and even healthy (Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2010). In addition, stressors “do not necessarily lead to subjective feelings of stress or to negative outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 59), and are events that unfold dynamically as time passes, resulting in a slow modification of behaviour and coping skills (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Although stressors that challenge an individual’s coping strategies may result in impaired physical and mental health, they can also stimulate the acquisition of new coping skills and adaptive strategies (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995).

Stress can be divided into ‘normative’ stress - stress that is predictable and that we would expect most people to encounter in any given situation or cohort; and ‘non-normative’ stress that is defined as something out of the ordinary, such as a sudden death, poverty or abuse. Stress among adolescents is an important field of study as “it has been suggested that up to 10 to 15 percent of adolescents experience chronic debilitating stress” (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004). This thesis is concerned with the impacts of normative academic stress on final year female students in high performing,

high-decile single-sex schools in New Zealand, an area that surprisingly has received little prior attention in any western country, but particularly in New Zealand.

The literature concerned with stress in secondary school students suggests a number of triggers - namely homework, expectations, high-stakes assessment and university pressure (Conner, Miles, & Pope, 2014; Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004; Robinson et al., 2009). In Conner, Pope and Galloway's (2010) study, the majority of students in the top level US schools they surveyed felt academic stress constantly. Results showed that "more than 70 percent of students reported that they often or always feel stressed by their schoolwork, and 56 percent reported often or always worrying about such things as grades, tests, and college acceptance" (p. 54). The literature seems to suggest that stress is a common state for students at high school level in the Western world.

### **Homework**

There has been much debate in recent years about the efficacy or value of homework. Currently in New Zealand there is a nationwide study taking place, conducted by Massey University, that is surveying students, parents and teachers from every year level about their thoughts on homework (Kearney & Mentis, 2016). Overseas, studies have questioned the value of homework and there has been growing concern that schools have got it wrong when it comes to homework (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Importantly for the study described in this thesis, as concern for wellbeing has grown, homework demands have increasingly been linked to stress in high school students (Cheung & Leung Ngai, 1992; Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013; Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). A majority of students list "schoolwork, homework, projects, grades, and fear of failure" as the group of things that cause the most stress in their lives (Galloway & Pope, 2007, p. 27). In addition, Galloway and Pope's study also reported that the students who spent the most time on homework each night "experienced more stress-related physical symptoms and poorer mental health than the other groups" (p. 28). Cheung and Leung Ngai (1992) also found that along with social pressures, "the content and workload of homework [was] predictive of the more somatic, depression and anxiety symptoms among the students" (p. 146). This is corroborated by anecdotal evidence which has also demonstrated that it is not uncommon for students to spend many hours, often into and through the night, completing homework or studying (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002). However it is not clear yet whether these excessive hours

spent studying or doing homework are due to time-management issues, lack of clarity over the task, or “a fact of senior high schooling where students are expected to cope with large amounts of homework” (Kouzma & Kennedy, 2002, p. 196). One student said “for some reason all teachers love to assign huge amounts of homework on the same nights, which keeps me awake till all hours trying to find the best possible answers because there is a lot of pressure put on us kids to do so well” (Conner et al., 2010, p. 54).

### **Expectations**

High-achieving schools have high expectations for their students (Luthar et al., 2013; Nordmo & Samara, 2009; Pope, 2001; Robertson, 2013). Another theme that emerges in the literature is that expectations can have a negative impact on student emotion and overall anxiety (Duckett et al., 2008; Locker & Copley, 2004; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Sharma & Sud, 1990). Those expectations come externally from teachers, parents and peers, and internally from students’ own motivations. Although there has been much in the literature concerned with teacher expectations, there has been little to date about other significant others’ expectations of students, and how this impacts student wellbeing (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). This again suggests a gap in the literature, especially in the New Zealand context, that could be investigated. On the other hand, there has also been research that shows a positive correlation between teacher expectation and student self-beliefs and achievement (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). It is therefore important to discover whether it is the positive or negative effects of expectations that have more impact on students in New Zealand.

Other research has shown that teacher expectations fall if they believe the parents’ expectations are low (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). A question to ask is whether this applies when the opposite is true; when teachers know parental expectations are very high, does that influence teachers to have higher expectations of their students? In one study a student said:

I think the hardest thing is when you fail . . . especially with teenagers, when they fail they probably think they can't do anything else, and I think that's when they start going off the rails a bit and start saying 'What's the point of me doing all of this when I'm just going to fail?' [Student]. (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010, p. 42)

This same study by Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) also interviewed students about parental expectations. Some students felt “overburdened by parents’ unrealistically high expectations to succeed” (p.49). One student said this:

It's, like, I had a friend . . . and her parents were very, very strict and very pushy on her homework . . . and they basically told her what she was going to be when she got older, a doctor . . . and the pressure became so much for her that she literally began to hate them and she would just be crying on the phone to me all the time . . . So sometimes that's not a good thing when parents are too controlling over you [Student]. (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010, p. 46)

Other students said that they put pressure on themselves, in order to please their parents, and that it wasn't always the parents exerting the pressure (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). It has also been suggested that the influence of peers and, particularly in high-achieving students, comparing themselves with others in their class or school is a topic that warrants investigation (Robertson, 2013).

This idea of the negative consequences of academic failure has been called ‘social derogation’ (Lowe & Lee, 2008) which is “the fear associated with failing tests and the negative reactions of significant others (e.g., teachers, peers, or parents). The test taker fears the possibility that other key people will devalue him or her for poor test results” (p. 233). But it is not just the expectations from a student's teachers, her parents, her peers and herself that put pressure on her sense of her own ability and academic worthiness. In New Zealand, as in many countries around the world:

... the taxpayers, public and parents expect results from the government; the government expects results from the Ministry of Education and its other agencies; the Ministry expects results from the schools; schools expect results from their teachers; and teachers expect results from their students. (Mutch, 2012, p. 379)

This appears to create many layers of expectations on our students. The question that seems to be missing is whether there is the same expectation from all these parties that schools will maximise student wellbeing. This is the question that needs to be asked if New Zealand education is to create ‘life-long learners’ with strong positive hauora. It

seems that adults think that high expectations are key contributors to positive wellbeing, but students themselves view pressure to succeed academically “as leading to negative well-being” (Duckett et al., 2008, p. 96). This suggests that it is important to listen to student voice in any research about student wellbeing.

### **Effects of stress**

The effects of stress have long been documented for different groups in society. “Chronic student stress has been consistently associated with negative outcomes” (Conner et al., 2010, p. 54). Two significant effects of stress on high school students are sleep deprivation and extra-curricular attrition.

Lack of sleep has been found to be particularly prevalent among adolescents experiencing academic stress. Unfortunately, the relationship between adolescent stress and their sleep goes both ways. Stress can disrupt sleep, and lack of sleep can “impair coping behaviours, resulting in higher levels of subjective stress” (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 61). There is also a bi-directional relationship between inadequate sleep and psychological distress. Each causes the other, and students find themselves in a vicious cycle (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 61). Students describe feeling constantly tired:

I just want more time to sleep and maintain a healthy lifestyle, but school keeps inundating me with work and tests at such a fast and constant rate that I’m always tired and stressed. Just this week I had three all-nighters in a row. (Conner et al., 2010, p. 56)

In addition to sleep deprivation, another of the unfortunate casualties of student stress is the decision by students to drop extra-curricular activities that they love, and that give them a chance at balance and wellbeing in their lives. Conner et al.’s (2010) study found that 60.3 percent of students at top-performing schools “reported having to drop an activity they enjoy because of school-work and other demands” (p. 55).

### **Test anxiety and gender differences**

The literature concerned with student wellbeing has long acknowledged the reality and impact of test anxiety in students (Locker & Cropley, 2004; Lowe & Lee, 2008;

Onwuegbuzie, 1995; Sharma & Sud, 1990). High-stakes assessment in a student's final year of high-school has been linked to "high levels of student psychological distress in many countries including Korea, Japan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom" (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 60). Hodge et al. (1997) examined test anxiety in a large group of students as they led up to their important final school examinations. They found that a significant proportion of students were experiencing high levels of distress during this period, particularly females. This pattern in the literature suggests that female students consistently report higher levels of anxiety and depression when assessed for test-anxiety. Girls also tend to underestimate their academic ability (Cole et al., 1999).

Frequently associated with the plethora of literature on test anxiety is the finding that females exhibit more worry, stress and anxiety than males when it comes to assessment (Cole et al., 1999; Hodge et al., 1997; Onwuegbuzie, 1995). Although once again the New Zealand literature is silent on this subject, many studies have been done both within and across cultures. One such cross-cultural study was *Examination stress and test anxiety: A cross cultural perspective* (Sharma & Sud, 1990). This study compared examination stress in terms of worry or emotionality across four Asian and five Euro-American countries. The large sample size, (7,679 high school students) and the robust and widely accepted *Test Anxiety Inventory* (TAI) for data collection make this study important.

Sharma and Sud (1990) found that females across all nine cultures had higher test anxiety, worry and emotionality than their male peers. Other studies have backed up these results, but with smaller participant numbers. Locker and Cropley (2004) found that gender differences in test anxiety and emotionality were found in almost all aspects of their study. In addition they found that it was particularly the girls in independent or grammar schools in England who reported a greater negative mood overall before examinations and, in particular, the girls only schools had the highest negative results for mood and distress (Locker & Cropley, 2004). It is also important to note that both the all girls' schools in the study were well established with a consistent high record of success at GCSE, 'A' Level and progression to university (Locker & Cropley, 2004). These qualifications are similar in rigor to the NCEA qualifications. Locker and Cropley's recommendations included that particular attention be paid to reducing overall anxiety and negative emotions, particularly in "all female schools and those with particularly high standards and expectations for students" (p. 342). This idea that high

achieving girls, and girls from high achieving schools, experience more test anxiety and worry than boys is further reinforced with the literature concerned with gifted students (Robertson, 2013). Importantly, Lowe and Lee (2008) found that those students, predominantly female, who had higher test anxiety, also had higher reported “levels of general anxiety, depression, suicide and feelings of hopelessness” (p. 232).

### **High achievers, emotional engagement and school burnout**

In addition to the evidence that girls are more affected by test anxiety than boys, is research evidence to suggest that high achieving and intelligent girls are the worst affected (Locker & Cropley, 2004; Sharma & Sud, 1990; Wang et al., 2015). Of interest to New Zealand are the results from Locker and Cropley’s (2004) study, which found that despite a six-eight week gap between testing for anxiety, with the second time immediately before the exams, there was no noticeable difference in the students’ levels of stress. They suggested that in future a larger time gap between the immediacy of the assessment and a time prior to the assessment is measured (Locker & Cropley, 2004, p. 342). In other words, even eight weeks before an important assessment, the students in the study were still anxious. This has implications for New Zealand students because of the continuous nature of NCEA. Students in New Zealand would seldom have more than eight weeks between assessments, with many important assessments often on the same day or certainly in the same week, constantly spread throughout each term. The nature of NCEA, where each subject has three or four internal assessments spread over the year, results in students being almost constantly assessed over their different subjects. If Locker and Cropley’s (2004) research can be transferred to the New Zealand context, then it could be suggested that some New Zealand students sitting NCEA might be permanently in a state of stress and anxiety.

Another important finding for New Zealand is the Finnish study by Wang et al. (2015). In that research the authors found that even though Finnish students rank highly in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) rankings, they were emotionally disengaged from school, “becoming more overwhelmed and anxious about school with the passing years” (Wang et al., 2015, p. 57). This again has implications for the New Zealand context, and suggests questions about student mental and emotional health.

A further concept of interest is the idea of ‘school burnout’ which has been described as “feeling overwhelmed and a lack of enjoyment and valuing in learning” (Wang et al., 2015, p. 58) The results of Wang et al’s (2015) study challenge the idea that successful grades equate to strong wellbeing or hauora. This research also reported a number of other studies that repeatedly found that students on a high-achievement, academic pathway feel “significantly burned out” after only 18 months of senior secondary school (p. 59). However, this particular report found that even though the Finnish students’ emotional and motivational health declined, their grades did not: “Neither the decline in emotional engagement nor the increase in school burnout was associated with a decline in GPA” (Wang et al., 2015, p. 62). This same finding emerged in Conner et al’s (2010) study, where student responses showed that they were clearly “experiencing distress. Their grades may indicate that they are meeting or exceeding academic standards, but their words indicate that they are sacrificing their health and wellbeing” (p. 56). Skelton (2010) also found that high achievement for girls was not automatically aligned with positive levels of well-being: “At the present time, girls are not the ‘success stories’ of restructured education systems if the claim assumes that academic achievement is accompanied by feelings of confidence, control and ease” (p.140). This might transfer to high performing single-sex schools and girls in New Zealand, and is worthy of investigation as “students who are not engaged in school emotionally may be able to earn good grades, but they are at risk for poor mental health outcomes” (Wang et al., 2015, p. 64).

Robertson (2013) found in a study of gifted students in high-achieving schools “that some advanced teenagers may experience affective difficulties, such as anxiety, lowered self-esteem, or depression. Anxiety appeared to be more prominent for “academically gifted teenagers in a challenging school program” (p. 465). It would be interesting to learn if this is the same in New Zealand schools. The question needing to be asked is whether it is predominantly the gifted students in high-achieving schools that are affected or, as in the Finnish study, it is all students. The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) report *Health Behavior in School-aged Children* (WHO, 2012) found that while overall school satisfaction among Finnish students was low, high-achieving students are at the greatest risk for experiencing adverse levels of stress and depression (as cited by Wang et al., 2015, p. 59). In addition, the 2012 PISA assessments showed that although

Korean students had the highest levels of academic achievement, they felt the least happy (PISA 2012).

### **Issues for ‘privileged’ students at high-decile schools**

Overseas, the research of students in ‘privileged’ schools has been led by Suniya Luthar, foundation Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University and Professor Emerita at Columbia University's Teachers College. Luthar has focused on the issues for students at schools in upper-middle class communities, and her research was the basis for the term “affluenza” (Koplewicz et al., 2009, p. 1053). The common reaction when thinking about students in privileged schools is that there is no need to focus on these students because surely economic privilege reduces their risk of emotional and health issues; “that education and money procure well-being” (Luthar, 2013, p. 65). As described earlier, coming from a wealthy background no longer protects young people from stress and anxiety. This particular group of youth are now much more vulnerable than they have been in previous generation (Luthar, 2013). Luthar and his colleagues research evidence over a ten year period suggests that it is the unremitting “pressure for high octane achievement” that is a significant cause of this change in vulnerability (Luthar, 2013, p. 65). In other research, “highly competitive learning environments have also been discussed in relation to students well-being” (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 256). In her longitudinal research of high-achieving students at a US high school with an “excellent reputation” (p. 2), Pope (2001) followed students who were “the pride of the education system and the hope for the future” (p. 3). What she found however, was a significantly different reality. Students were sacrificing sleep and living in an almost constant state of stress, anxiety and frustration (Pope, 2001).

There is a growing cadre of evidence that “distress and pathology are thriving within seemingly pristine and protected communities” (Yates, Tracy, & Luthar, 2008, p. 61). Despite being “en route to the most prestigious universities and well-paying careers”, upper middle class students are “more likely to be more troubled” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529) than their less financially privileged peers, experiencing more anxiety and more achievement pressure (Yates et al., 2008). These same students also exhibit “elevated levels of NSSI [non-suicidal self-injury] perhaps because of increased pressure to contain their emotions and achieve at superior levels” (Yates et al., 2008, p. 59). When it comes to girls from affluent communities, research has found that they

have “higher rates, compared to norms, of serious depressive, anxiety and somatic symptoms” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529). Although using a small sample, Robertson (2013), found that for gifted students in a challenging school programme, anxiety was heightened compared to their non-gifted contemporaries in a regular school. 58 percent of all gifted students in her study said “I worry a lot”; 75 percent of female students made the same statement (Robertson, 2013, p. 473). These perceptions came from “intrapersonal influences, such as excessive perfectionism or self-criticism, and environmental factors such as heavy workloads and conflicting role expectations” (for girls) and it was surmised by Robertson that these things “may also contribute to stress and worry” (Robertson, 2013, p. 476). In her book *The Price of Privilege*, Levine (2008) states that “22% of adolescent girls from financially comfortable families suffer from clinical depression” (p. 18), which is three times the national rate in North America. Of more concern is Levine’s statement that “by the end of high school, as many as one-third of girls can exhibit clinically significant symptoms of anxiety” (p. 18). When it is accepted that “10-15% of those who suffer from depression eventually commit suicide” with similar levels suffering from eating disorders (Levine, 2008, p. 21), we have every reason to be very concerned about what is happening for our young women in high-decile, high performing schools.

It is important to understand what is causing stress in our students in privileged communities. The bulk of the research suggests that the most significant stressor is academic achievement pressure (Luthar, 2013; Luthar et al., 2013; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Nordmo & Samara, 2009). This pressure to succeed and achieve stems largely from the value our western culture places on achievement, “with wealth and status touted as ultimate life goals” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1545). Schools reinforce the message that it is important to work hard and advance ahead of your peers. Parents tend to value these communities “where ambitious people... are driven and smart” (Brenner, 2013, as cited in Luthar et al. (2013, p. 1545). However these values can “threaten the wellbeing of individuals and communities” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529). The most recent New Zealand research that alludes to this idea and which links to the idea of performativity, is the New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER)’s *Survey of Secondary Schools* in 2015 (Wylie & Bonne, 2016). From this research, in the chapter titled ‘Issues facing secondary schools in 2015’, the authors report a significant difference between schools with a decile of 9 or 10 (high decile), and schools with a

lower decile. Issues of NCEA workload for teachers, assessment driving the curriculum, and NCEA workload for students were reported more often by teachers and principals in high decile schools than those from lower decile schools. These New Zealand results appear to link closely with the international literature that focuses on issues for schools in privileged communities.

Both Pope (2001) and Levine (2008) discuss in detail the effects of achievement pressure on students from high socio-economic communities, suggesting that “unremitting academic pressure leads to depression, anxiety, even suicide in some children, and a debilitating sense of not being able to keep up in many more” (Levine, 2008, p. 30). Other research suggests that in a highly competitive learning environment, motivation for students shifts from being intrinsic to being extrinsic, as they compete with each other for grades which will determine entry into the next level of education and especially into “attractive programs with limited access” (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 255). In this competitive environment, student self-image becomes aligned with grade identification, and the focus turns to the extrinsic rewards of a high grade. This behaviour is “contrary to the goals expressed in policy documents, namely student independence, peer cooperation, self-development, intrinsic motivation and a deep approach to learning” (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 256). Other research (Robertson, 2013; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005) suggests that another consequence for students in high performing schools is a variation in their academic self-concept depending on the level of academic challenge in their school. In other words, a student in a more challenging school setting will have a lower academic self-perception compared to a similarly able student in a less challenging academic setting. The lowered academic self-perception then affects students’ course selection, grades and aspirations of otherwise very capable adolescents (Robertson, 2013). Some “experience social isolation or increased stress, or feel discouraged when they perceive themselves as competing with peers they view as brighter students” (Robertson, 2013, p. 466). We are warned that the pervasive emphasis both schools and their privileged communities place on going to a ‘good’ university and getting a good job in order to achieve long-term happiness, has consequences, and we should “not lose sight of the possible costs to the mental health and wellbeing of all concerned” (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005, p. 52).

Another consequence of achievement pressure appears to be what the research refers to as ‘overscheduling’ (Luthar et al., 2013; Robertson, 2013; Yates et al., 2008). Students

feel pressure to not only maintain top grades, but also to be involved in as many extra-curricular activities as possible, in order to enhance their appeal and chances of scholarships to prestigious university programmes. This pressure, in addition to the academic pressure, can exacerbate stress, lead to burnout (Robertson, 2013) and may result in students “sacrificing normal social life” (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 255).

Finally, in regard to students from high performing schools in high-decile communities, there is a repeated call in the literature not to overlook these young people (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Pope, 2001; Rainey, 2013; Yates et al., 2008). Luthar and others have consistently called for an end to the neglect of these so-called ‘privileged’ youth, who have been “treated, thus far, as not needing (our) attention” (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005, p. 49). Although the number of studies into the wellbeing of this particular population of students is small, it is growing and so far all the results are pointing in the same direction and “overlooking the signs of distress in [these] youth is a recipe for disaster” (Yates et al., 2008, p. 61). Luthar et al. (2013) go on to assert that “it is unconscionable for us in science to deliberately disregard any group of children known to be statistically at risk” (p. 1537). Other calls for action suggest that it “remains important to investigate sources of negative affect such as worry in advanced learners - for girls in particular – and to address these concerns with teachers, students and parents” (Robertson, 2013, p. 478). Rick Commons, the Principal of Harvard-Westlake School, one of the USA’s most acclaimed high schools, has said that the “great challenge ... in schools where excellence is a value is to simultaneously have balance as a value” (Rainey, 2013). Although in New Zealand we may not be dealing with the same levels of wealth as exists at Harvard-Westlake School, Lund and Dearing (2012) have found that it is “not family wealth per se, but rather, (it) is living in the cultural context of affluence, that connotes risk” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529). This therefore is an area of study that all New Zealanders should be concerned about, but especially those living and educating their children in high-decile communities.

### **Student voice**

Much of the literature found for this review was adult-centric in its approach and implementation, with a few notable exceptions. As stated earlier, there are possibly misjudgments happening when adults are asked about student experience, or when research is only driven by quantitative data. Two studies in particular paid careful

attention to the importance of collecting student voice in any research into students lived experiences. Both Mansfield (2014) and Duckett et al. (2008) comment on the fact that students' voices have been neglected in the research into student wellbeing so far. In addition, research suggests that children and young people's voice and agency is central to their wellbeing and "given the subjective nature of what constitutes wellbeing, it is imperative that children and young people are included in efforts to better understand it, as well as how it can be better supported and monitored" (Graham et al., 2016, p. 370). Mansfield (2014) states that including student voice is imperative for inclusive research and practice: "The student voice literature argues that including and honoring students' perspectives yields richer, more authentic research results as well as a more democratic learning space that fosters positive student outcomes" (p. 393). If researchers are going to focus on learning about the wellbeing of students in high-decile, high performing single-sex girls' schools, they must, according to Mansfield and Duckett et al, include student voice in their research. Mansfield's paper, in particular, highlights the gaps between what teachers and school leaders believe and what the students' actual lived experiences are (Mansfield, 2014).

## **Summary**

The literature surveyed for this research suggests that there are issues for all students in their secondary school years, but in particular for girls at high-decile, high performing single-sex schools. There is scant literature to date on this group in New Zealand, and an international call for researchers to pay attention to these underrepresented students. This study attempts to redress this gap in the literature for New Zealand schools, educational leaders, teachers and students.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The methodological, sampling and analysis approaches applied in this research are described in this chapter. Firstly, the use of a paradigmatically feminist and critical qualitative investigation is detailed and justified. Following that, the three participating schools are introduced and the sampling strategies used are investigated. The details of the focus group and interviewing methods employed for data collection are described. The process of analysis is illustrated and justified. The chapter concludes with the aspects that were considered to achieve maximum validity and to ensure ethical research practice. These aspects are then described and discussed in relation to triangulation.

### **Methodological approach**

#### **Paradigms**

In academic research, it is accepted that all research design evolves from the researcher's paradigm (Wolgemuth et al., 2014). As this research takes place in an educational context, it falls under the social science research umbrella "because it focusses on people, organizations and interactions" (Mutch, 2005, p. 18). Mutch (2005) goes on to say that educational research "can be informed by a feminist perspective ... or it can challenge power relationships through critical theory" (p. 18). The intention of this research was to give voice to the young women interviewed and to challenge existing power relationships in school settings. Therefore, a qualitative approach that is paradigmatically feminist and critical was most appropriate for this research. Krauss (2005) suggests that qualitative research "is based on a relativistic, constructionist ontology that posits that there is no objective reality. Rather, there are multiple realities constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest" (p.760). Cresswell and Miller (2000) state that "the qualitative paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and it is what participants perceive it to be" (p. 125). As the participants and focus of the inquiry were all young women, whose voices have not yet been heard in New Zealand educational discourse, it was important to approach the research through a feminist lens.

The characteristics of a feminist paradigm include:

... a woman centeredness in that (1) women's experiences are the major "object" of investigation, (2) the goal of inquiry is to see the world from the vantage point of a particular group of women, and (3) it is critical and activist in its effort to improve the lot of women and all persons. (Campbell & Bunting, 1991, p. 6)

This study, however, positions itself at the milder end of the feminist theory continuum, a position which "advocate[s] adaptation of the incumbent system to make it more amenable to the progress and promotion of women's interests" (Campbell & Bunting, 1991, p. 2). In addition, the researcher is motivated to "raise the consciousness" (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p. 24) of the issues for the young women in the study, by placing them at the centre of the inquiry; a traditionally feminist approach. Feminist approaches also recognise "the essential importance of examining women's experiences..., [are] attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power,... and a commitment to political activism and social justice" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 3).

Stepping back from this socially feminist/critical paradigm, the ontological and epistemological assumptions that precede the paradigm are investigated, as well as the most appropriate methodological approaches, methods and data sources: "It is our ontological and epistemological positions that shape the very questions we may ask in the first place, how we pose them and how we set about answering them" (Grix, 2002, p. 179). Grix (2002) also states that "all research necessarily starts from a person's view of the world, which itself is shaped by the experience one brings to the research process" (p. 179). In this case, because of the recurring pattern of distress I have witnessed in my own students over the years, my ontological position is that there is a reality, constructed by them, being experienced by girls in high performing high-decile single-sex schools that is affecting their wellbeing. Luthar et al. (2013) reinforce this position when they state that "there is enormous power when academics describe, empathetically and in real-world terms, problems about which they have firsthand knowledge" (p. 1539).

### **Ontological and epistemological assumptions**

In the feminist theory paradigm, the ontology is that the spiritual, physical and relational universe, including the notions of god, nature and humanity, are not separate but are

intertwined indelibly (Grix, 2002). Critical research also seeks to challenge the status quo and the traditional power bases in society. Its ontology is also concerned with change, challenge, action and empowerment (Doucet et al., 2010).

Campbell and Bunting (1991) describe the epistemology in feminist theory as acknowledging that “women’s experience can be a legitimate source of knowledge, women can be knowers, subjective data are valid, informants are ‘experts’ in their own lives, and knowledge is relational and contextual” (p. 7). In feminist theory, the epistemology is that personal knowledge is political knowledge, knowledge is female centered, and that the affective is just as important as the cognitive (Grix, 2002). Only the female students in this study can know what it is like to be a girl in a high-decile high performing single-sex school, experiencing the three year NCEA assessment system. It is their affective knowledge, and the consequences of it, that this research aims to uncover: “A feminist methodology ... rests on an epistemological stance that says if you want to understand someone's world, you have to get inside it” (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 67). This claim leads to the next step in the process, which is methodology. In order to understand the realities of the young women in this study, it was imperative to ‘get inside’ their realities, and there are specific methodological approaches which are more conducive to this level of interaction. By using a qualitative, feminist methodology, this research aimed to give voice and agency to the young women with whom I am in dialogue.

## **Methodology**

Although the literature struggles to identify a distinctive feminist methodology, some themes run through most feminist research (Punch, 2005). These include that feminist methodology is non-hierarchical, is critical of androcentrism and racism, encourages validation and sharing with participants, and is dialogic when obtaining information from participants (Grix, 2002). Importantly for this study, feminist methodology “does not deny or discount the subjective but rather seeks to validate the private, emotional, interiorized, intimate world” (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p. 5). Also of direct relevance to this inquiry is the feminist researcher contention that women can simultaneously conform to social expectations that negatively affect them, and oppose those same expectations that limit their freedom (Cook & Fonow, 1986). In this case, the question being asked is ‘Do the limits on the students’ freedom come from negative impacts on

their wellbeing?’ Feminist theory highlights the importance of accessing women’s “private terrain of consciousness” which is viewed as a woman’s “sphere of freedom” in a context in which conforming “unfree” behaviour is also a reality for women (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p. 7). Both of these spheres, ‘unfree’ conforming behaviour (possibly the students’ intensive efforts to achieve high grades), and free consciousness (their predicted awareness of the consequences of unbalanced hauora and the reasons for this), can co-exist simultaneously. It is the purpose of feminist methodology to access this consciousness so that, in this case, these young women could express themselves freely and have a voice and agency in a culture that appears to disallow them from veering away from the expected behaviour of continuous high achievement.

As the goal for this research was to reveal the hidden realities of young women, the methodology was also qualitative in nature. Campbell and Bunting (1991) suggest that feminist methodological conditions include that “research should be based on women’s experiences, and the validity of women’s perceptions as ‘truth’ for them should be recognised. Research should [also] address questions women want answered (i.e., should be for women)” (p. 8). The methodology was also dialogic (Grix, 2002), because it aimed to expose the reality for this particular sub-group of young people in New Zealand. As Doucet et al. (2010) describe, qualitative methods allow “the voices and concerns of women to be heard through engaging in dialogue, reflection, and critique” (p. 301). Other literature concerned with students at high performing schools in high socio-economic communities gives more weight to the use of qualitative methodologies. Luthar et al. (2013) state that “adolescents’ own reports must be at the center of this work; there must be concentrated focus on youths’ phenomenological, subjective interpretations of their own realities” (p. 1539). These qualitative, dialogic methodologies lead to clear methods of collecting the data necessary to find patterns or themes.

## **Research design**

### **Data collecting methods**

As part of the qualitative critically feminist methodology, a sequential design approach was used. Two different research tools and techniques were applied across three different secondary schools in order to avoid bias or distortion and increase validity and integrity in this research, The first step was to conduct qualitative focus groups in each

school in order to get “rich” and “thick” data (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129) from small groups of participants about their experience of reality. The second stage involved qualitative individual interviews with four students, each of whom had already taken part in a focus group at their school. Interviews were employed in order to understand the lived realities of the participants. This process of using two different research methods as described above assisted in minimising both bias and distortion. In addition, this process resulted in more meaningful data being extrapolated from the lived experiences of girls in their final year in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools in New Zealand.

### **Sampling frame and design**

In qualitative research, sample selection is usually non-random, purposive or purposeful, and small (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A nonprobability sampling strategy was used when considering the selection of schools where potential participants would most likely be found. The strategic process of purposive sampling is used when researchers choose samples based on needing to gather participants who are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2008). Firstly, only high-decile high performing girls’ schools were approached. Secondly, the purposive sampling of girls who were in their final year of school and their final year of NCEA was applied because these participants were considered, as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to be the ones who could provide the most insight.

Nine secondary schools across New Zealand that matched the desired profile of high-decile and high performing single-sex girls’ schools, were invited to take part in the study. The girls’ only schools were identified using a combination of their decile rating and their published success with NCEA results. The pool of schools that fit these criteria in New Zealand is relatively small. The intent was to achieve “maximum variation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 257) within my very specific criteria. I hoped to obtain a range of schools within these criteria, with a mixture of state schools, state-integrated<sup>2</sup> schools and private schools, to represent the broadest possible spectrum of characteristics that were of significance to this particular study. All the private schools

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<sup>2</sup> In New Zealand, a state-integrated school is a former private school which has integrated into the state education system under the Private Schools Conditional Integration Act 1975, becoming a state school while retaining its special character.

approached declined to take part, as did one of the state-integrated schools, one that is perceived as ‘exclusive’. This tendency is reflected in the literature: “We recognize that access into exclusive schools and communities can be very difficult, because of intense and often legitimate concerns about privacy” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1539). The two state schools and one integrated school approached were enthusiastic participants, and so I was left with a sample of three schools, representing two different types, as shown in Table 3-1 below.

*Table 3-1: Participating schools*

School A. Large, state, girls’ school in City 1. Decile 9.
School B. Large, state girls’ school in City 1. Decile 9.
School C. Medium sized state-integrated girls’ school in City 2. Decile 9.

Purposively sampling a range of schools with different cultures and populations was the preferable approach, as this increased the likelihood of allowing readers to judge the transferability of the findings to their own education contexts. The absence, therefore, of any private school data is disappointing. The inclusion however of both state and state-integrated schools may enable some transferability of this study’s findings to these school types. The limitations of the sample are not restricted to the lack of any private school data, as there are other variations in high-decile high performing single-sex girls’ schools, such as urban versus rural, North Island versus South Island and so on. We can never be sure, as qualitative researchers, “that our sample is representative of the whole population. Sampling always involves a compromise” warns Wellington (2000, p. 58). To begin the discussion around issues for girls in these types of schools was the intention of this research, in preference to making generalisations about all girls in this category. The limitations of this study are described further in the final chapter of this thesis.

Small samples were used for both the focus groups and the interviews in each school. Two focus groups and one interview were conducted at School A, two focus groups and two interviews were conducted at School B, and one focus group and one interview were conducted at School C. This was necessary for a number of reasons, including the issue of the timeframe for the research and also because smaller groups are

recommended when participants are very involved in the issue, the topic is controversial or complex, or they are likely to have much to say on the topic being researched (Morgan, 1998a, as cited in Bryman, 2008). I found this to be true in all three schools. The aim was to have six students in each focus group, and this was the case on paper; however, unfortunately there were 'no-shows' in four instances, an issue that Bryman (2008) highlights. The smaller actual group numbers (4-6) resulted in more participation and richer data. The fewer participants had more than enough to say. The 'no-shows' were understandable when considering that the students were giving up their own time, either at lunchtime, after school or during a study period. This also meant that the students who did turn up were very motivated to participate.

### **Methods of data collection**

#### **Focus groups**

In the sequential design of this qualitative study, I started my research activity with focus groups in each school. A focus group is defined as a group of people who are interviewed together in order to achieve an accurate representation of the views of the group (Ribbins, 2007). In addition, data were produced because of the group dynamics and the resulting synergy and this data may not have emerged in an individual interview (Coleman, 2012). The difference between a focus group and a group interview is that the focus group tends to emphasise a specific topic or theme in depth, compared to group interviews where topics are explored more widely and the researcher has more of a central role (Bryman, 2004). As a facilitator or moderator of a focus group, Bryman (2004) suggests that the researcher needs to be flexible and not too intrusive. It was important to achieve a high level of trust and rapport between me as the researcher and the groups I was working with. In addition, there needed to be a high level of reciprocity and a focus on the perspectives of the young women in each group. Finally, as with interviews in a feminist epistemology, I aimed for a non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewees, or the group, and me. By starting with a focus group, I was able to set some clear boundaries in place regarding the type of data I was interested in. This meant that the participants who went on to an interview were knowledgeable about what the limits of the research were. For example, I made it clear in the focus groups that the research was not about critiquing the school or particular teachers, but rather gathering data about the wider environment that these schools are operating within, and how this wider environment affects the participants. The focus

group method was used five times in total; twice at each of the large state schools, and once at the smaller integrated school.

I decided that focus groups were the most appropriate method for this study for a number of reasons. Primarily, participants have more control and the format is flexible in a focus group (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Focus groups are usually structured around pre-determined stimulus questions about an issue or set topic, in this case about wellbeing, the demands of NCEA, and their school's leaders' involvement in helping to alleviate any perceived stress. I allowed some negotiation of responses that enabled an in-depth discussion to evolve within the group. Participants were able to discuss their personal experiences, perceptions and specific contexts regarding the issue. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) suggest that by using focus groups, a researcher gains the advantage of allowing participants more time to reflect on and remember experiences. By using the focus group method for this study, more depth and flexibility was available in order to better understand the lived experiences of girls in their final year of NCEA in their schools. This also gave the student participants the ability to largely control the discussion around the indicative questions, and this allowed the evidence of their experiences and realities to emerge.

Secondly, the focus group method provided a certain flexibility which meant that the students' ideas could be modified or amplified as others' responses initiated new thoughts or connections for participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Lofland et al., 2006). This flexibility allowed for the generation of discussion and created a more authentic account of what final year students in these schools' experience. This kind of discussion was sparked when some participants had not thought of some aspects of their experience, but exclaimed enthusiastically in agreement when another student mentioned a particular situation, event or experience. A focus group also has the advantage of possibly eliciting a wide variety of views on the issue being discussed. In addition, members of the focus group can bring up issues within the one researched. These other related issues are "important and significant ... this process of arguing means that the researcher may stand a chance of ending up with more realistic accounts of what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly review their views" (Bryman, 2004, p. 348).

There are, however, limitations of the focus group method. One of these is that the researcher has less control over the process than in more formal interview or group interview situations. Feminist researchers still see this as an advantage however (Bryman, 2004). As the researcher, I needed to be aware of how involved I wanted to be, and to what extent I was happy for the focus group to move away from the research questions I had planned. In order to get the most benefit out of the focus groups, I kept my questions open-ended, qualitative and simple, and had a clear idea as to what extent I was willing to let the participants take the discussion in different directions. As a feminist researcher, I was willing to follow the discussion where it led, but I also wanted to have tangible data with which to answer my research questions. To counteract this possibility, I had a set of twelve questions, along with ideas for linking questions for when the group veered off topic, ensuring that the conversation flowed and the questions were generally answered.

It has been acknowledged that participants may respond differently in a focus group when opinions and experiences are shared, and this is a limitation of the focus group method, compared to an individual interview. Walliman and Buckler (2008) suggest that compared to an individual interview, a participant “may feel more comfortable responding in a group setting and may actually say more than they would in an individual interview” (p. 173). I acknowledge that some members of the focus groups may have held back responses or experiences that they felt uncomfortable sharing with other members of the group, who in some instances were complete strangers to them, especially in the large schools. Nevertheless, I believe that the warm and supportive atmosphere that I worked hard to achieve in each group was evident, allowing participants to speak openly. I also sensed that because this was their last year at school, the participants felt a certain freedom from any consequences of their outspokenness, especially when I assured them that this document would not be published until they were finished school. By directing questions to specific participants who were having a hard time finding a dialogic gap, I managed to include responses from all members of each focus group, and there were no instances of a participant remaining silent for the duration of the group.

I conducted a trial focus group with Year 13 students in the school that I worked in most recently, with the aim of testing the quality of the questions and gauging the reality of the time-frame I had allowed. I discovered whilst running this trial group that some of

the questions were repetitive and some other areas of interest needed to be included. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) consider piloting crucial for sound interviewing practice, in that it ensures that the study is reliable and allows the researcher to discover which questions need re-wording, or omitting, and which questions need to be included after pilot group participants' suggestions. This refining of the questions was important because "quality answers are directly related to quality questions" (Krueger, 1994, p. 53). This process also allowed me, as the researcher, to practice my interviewing skills and gain valid experience in recording and taking notes at the same time as asking questions and following the thread of the discussion.

Bryman (2008) suggests that it is important to provide relatively flexible and unstructured settings for focus groups and that it is also important to be open to what order questions are asked or answered. In doing this, I could keep within the traditions of qualitative research and procure authentic and open views and perspectives of these Year 13 girls in high-decile high performing single-sex schools. This approach to questioning is advocated by Conger (1998) who states that 'volunteer-directed' responses are more likely to reflect the true thoughts and feelings of the respondent. I was further aware of time constraints for the participants, and was very cognizant of not wanting to add to their stress levels by taking up too much of their time. This strategy is recognised as another advantage of using the focus group method (Walliman & Buckler, 2008). Coleman (2012) also suggests that "thought should be given to time, mainly to ensure that interviewees are not stressed by time limits, or exhausted at the end of the day" (p. 358). In order to do this, I restricted the focus groups to sixty minutes' duration, either during lunchtime, a study period, or after school. Senior leaders in all schools assisted me by providing a private meeting room on a date and time that was convenient to the school and the students. This saved time and ensured a more focused session.

It is important for participants in focus groups to have as much information as possible about the study they are taking part in before they arrive. This information includes such things as the purpose of the research, the methods used to collect data, the benefits and any consequences - good or bad - of the research project in which they have agreed to participate (Wilkinson, 2001). By providing the principals of each school with details about the research, including participant information sheets, the content of email invitations to participate, as well as copies of the questions themselves, (see Appendices

A, C, D and E) the schools were able to make organisational consent possible, or not. At the beginning of each focus group, each participant was provided with the *Participant information sheet* (see Appendix A) that included all the information described above, as well as information about how the data would be recorded, and how and where the data would be stored. This ‘fully informed’ nature of focus groups is crucial in order to respect the autonomy and wellbeing of all the participants concerned (Wilkinson, 2001). The participants were all given adequate time to consider the invitation to take part, and their involvement remained voluntary because no rewards, gifts or advantages were offered. Five focus groups were conducted for this research: one group of six, one group of five, two groups of four and one group of three. All the groups consisted of a range of girls in Year 13 with varying abilities, subject choices and cultures. Twenty-two participants were involved across the six focus groups. It was made very clear to the participants that they had a right to withdraw from the research at any stage up until data analysis was to start.

It was important to safeguard the confidentiality and protection of personal information shared by any participant. Some of the protocols used to ensure this included not using participants’ real names or any identifying qualities of their schools in any permanent form; pseudonyms were used in all cases. In addition, I was careful not to share disclosures between groups. All the data collected were stored securely throughout the entire research process, including using passwords to protect all the electronic information and locked cabinets to secure hard copies. Because participants were sharing in front of each other in the focus groups, it was explained to them that their anonymity could not be completely guaranteed in these groups.

Ethical issues were an important consideration in this research, especially as the participants were all students. Ethical reasoning must be employed, suggests Wilkinson (2001), because research can be beneficial but it can also impose burdens on people. In order to protect participants from any potential harm, procedures were established, as Bryman (2008) warns that issues can arise at any time. Although the researcher can make participants aware of ethical issues that might arise and can go some way towards addressing them, they cannot be entirely avoided, and the possibility of these issues arising was made clear to the participants on the *Participant information sheet* (see Appendix A). All participants signed a *Consent form* (see Appendix B) confirming their understanding of the research prior to its commencement and that their participation was

entirely voluntary. No one was asked to participate if they were reluctant to. As all the student participants were over sixteen years of age, parental consent was not required by Auckland University of Technology's (AUT) ethics committee, (AUTECH), or by the participating schools. Participants were encouraged not to use specific names (for example of particular teachers or school leaders) but were warmly encouraged to discuss their experiences and any consequences of these experiences. The participants were reassured that their participation and responses in this final document would remain anonymous and confidential. I was careful to ask them to respect the confidentiality of the session for their peers.

Questions were carefully prepared for the focus group that were open-ended and ordered in a natural, logical sequence (Kruger & Casey, 2009). However, I let the participants lead the progress and order of the questions, so these were not necessarily asked or answered in the order that I had prepared them. This is a positive consequence of the flexible nature and setting of the focus group (Bryman, 2008). Often one question would be answered and the participants would add something that would have come up in the later questions. Depending on the progress of the responses, I would at times ask more probing questions to better understand the evolving responses. The session began with broad questions that were intended to start the group talking and engaging in the discussion around the issue of what it is like to be a girl in Year 13 in a high-decile, high performing single-sex school. As time went on, the questions became more specific, looking at specific things that school leaders could do to help ease some of the stress and distress experienced by these girls.

Although Lofland et al. (2006) note that people often disagree when opinions are shared, this was not experienced in this study. There was surprising agreement and unanimity within and across the groups about the students' experiences in these particular educational contexts with the demands of NCEA.

### **Interviews**

Following on from the focus groups, I used semi-structured interviews with randomly selected volunteers from those focus groups. Evidence in the literature suggests that the best way to expose individual experience is through an interview (Davidson & Tolich, 2003; Hinds, 2000). It has also been suggested that the "purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in somebody else's mind ... to explore their views in ways that cannot

be achieved by other forms of research” (Ribbins, 2007, p. 208) and that it is “probably the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies in education” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 106). Along with the flexibility obtained in a critically feminist qualitative inquiry, Cook and Fonow (1986) suggest that as a feminist researcher I should view the interview “as an interactional exchange” whereby “answering the questions of interviewees personalizes and humanizes the researcher and places the interaction on a more equal footing” (p. 9). This strategy of listening more, and allowing myself to speak if I felt I needed to “empower[ed] interviewees to set the agenda and the outcome while not withholding from them the researcher’s own experiences and feelings” (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 67). This again suggests a semi-structured interview method. Wellington (2000) also confirms that the interviewer should not play the leading role in an interview situation; rather, she should aim to “give a person or a group of people, a ‘voice’. It should provide them with a ‘platform’, a chance to make their viewpoints heard and eventually read ... in this sense the interviewer empowers people” (p. 72). This aligned with my intention to empower and give voice to the student participants. In addition, I aimed to empower teacher-leaders with information about how they can modify the system of three years of almost continuous assessment to better meet students’ wellbeing needs. Other research has shown that when the research questions are abandoned, the participants speak about the real issues for them, rather than what the researcher thought the issues were, and so more valid and more responsive data can be collected that better expose “the actual concerns of the women” (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p. 9). I kept this in mind in conducting the individual interviews.

Four sets of data were gathered from students at three different schools using this one-on-one interview method. Participants were randomly selected from those who expressed a desire at the end of the focus group to be involved again in an individual interview. In every focus group, every single participant demonstrated willingness to go on to an individual interview. Every interview consisted of a “series of major questions, with sub-questions and possible follow-up questions” (Coleman, 2012, p. 252). It was hoped that the technique of asking sub-questions and follow-up questions to drill deeper down into the students’ responses would result in richer data from the participants.

Another strength that the semi-structured interview has is that “it substantially reduces the possibility of interviewer bias and increases the comprehensiveness and comparability of interviewee response” (Ribbins, 2007, p. 210). Although relatively

specific issues or experiences are included, the participant has significant freedom in how she responds to the questions; what she chooses to include and what she chooses to exclude. (Bryman, 2008). This flexibility of the semi-structured interview was important for when students wanted to talk about specific experiences, or when their answer was sufficient and no probing or sub-questions were needed. This also resulted in questions being omitted if these had been answered within another question or were not relevant to that particular interviewee. This enabled the interviewer to respond on the spot to the way the interview was unfolding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Walliman & Buckler, 2008). The sequential design of this study meant that the interviews were conducted following the focus groups in all three schools participating in this study. This meant that I had the benefit of asking the interviewees to comment in more depth about issues or experiences they had raised previously in the focus group, creating the advantage of a deeper contextual understanding of the data. The interview technique consequently had the advantage of using these additional prompts (Hinds, 2000) or probes (Lofland et al., 2006; Merriam, 1998) to develop a more complete understanding, to collect additional information and to elucidate initial responses. Finally, the semi-structured interview method also had the advantage of collecting a large amount of data reasonably quickly (Bryman, 2008).

By using the same questions, largely, as were used in the focus groups, (see Appendix E) researcher bias or subjectivity with the participants was reduced (Bryman, 2008). Ribbins (2007) reinforces this advantage of a semi-structured interview format when he says that “it substantially reduces the possibility of interviewer bias and increases the comprehensiveness and comparability of the interviewee response” (p. 210). In order to reduce researcher bias it was important to maintain similar questions. However, there remained some differentiation between the questions asked because not all the students had experienced the same things. This technique of utilising similar questions for all interviews also resulted in more straightforward data analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The interviewees’ experiences of NCEA in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools was the context for this study and therefore the interview questions were focused around that context. What school leaders could do to ease some of the negative affect occurring in these contexts was discussed in further questions. In order to mitigate any time stress for the participants, interviews were kept within a school period

or lunchtime of fifty minutes more or less in each school. The place, date and time of each interview was agreed with the interviewee prior to the interview, and in all cases the participant decided on the best time for her. All interviews took place at the interviewees' schools, in a private meeting room to avoid interruptions (Coleman, 2012). This helped to save time and resulted in more specific and focused interviews.

The same approach for recording data was used in both the focus groups and the interviews. In order to achieve Bryman's (2008) suggestions of utilising a reliable device for recording voices and a private and quiet room in which to conduct both the focus groups and interviews, I used the 'Voice Memo' app on my i-phone. This enabled me to have quality in terms of clarity of the voices and also enabled me to hear variations in tone, pitch, pace and volume (Walliman & Buckler, 2008). After using the app I transferred the recordings to Google Drive, in order to ensure the data was preserved and could be analysed at a later date (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By taking outline notes as the interview progressed, I could minimise the risk of relying wholly on the recording. This also meant that I was able to keep a close track of what was said, and what questions were still unanswered, as suggested by Lofland et al. (2006). By following accurately in this manner, I was able to probe more effectively and keep track during the course of the interview.

### **Data analysis**

As the researcher, I had a significant influence into what and how data were to be reported (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Therefore it is crucial, according to Lofland et al. (2006), that quality data that can be easily and incisively analysed is collected by the researcher, who is the principal mechanism in data collection and analysis. Data analysis can be defined as "a transformative process in which the raw data is turned into findings or results" (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 195). I collected and analysed all the data in this research myself, but used a third party to transcribe the data, who signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix F). It is suggested by Watling and James (2007) that analysis of qualitative data should continue throughout all phases of a research project, and therefore for this reason, and to minimise time constraint issues, I began analysing data as soon as possible when the transcripts were completed. In this way, I could track emerging themes and use these as focusing questions in later interviews. In a critically feminist qualitative study, data is descriptive and in-depth, or

“rich” and “thick” (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129), and often results in themes emerging from the data. These recurring patterns or themes made themselves evident in the process of analysis and “cut through” the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 257). It was important during the analysis process to be methodical and persistent as I organised the significant collection of data that emerged from this critically feminist qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 2005). I made notes around the transcripts and handwritten observations, noting themes that developed as I went. In order to achieve in-depth analysis, I then coded and highlighted the transcripts into themes in order to make conclusions about the data. In this way, I sorted the data into distinct groups allowing for the emergence of organised and meaningful categories, a process identified by Lofland et al. (2006) as ‘coding’. The codes I used in the data analysis process included ‘Ex’ which stood for ‘expectations’; ‘CPS’, which indicated ‘constant pressure to succeed’; and ‘Sys’ which indicated a comment about systems. By using this coding procedure, I was able to identify common themes that began emerging from the data obtained from the focus groups and the interviews. Significantly, these themes emerged from data within schools, across schools and across both focus groups and the interviews. To circumvent the possibility of misconstruing the context of what was said, I frequently referred to the original recordings and my handwritten notes. In this way, I hoped to also avoid the ensuing fragmentation of data that Bryman (2008) cautions against and hence ensured that the trustworthiness of the research was maintained as far as possible.

After coding the data accurately and specifically, common themes emerged which I then analysed in mind-map form. These mind-maps were then used to develop the analysis further and for visualising connections and links (Conger, 1998). From the mind-maps I then extracted categories and sub-categories which evolved into the foundations of the research’s main findings. Although I was careful to maintain the anonymity of the students and schools in the final published findings (Bryman, 2008), it was important to retain the core meanings and intentions of the participants’ voices.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the process of trying to make sense of one’s findings is both artistic and political. They assert that there is no single truth when it comes to interpreting qualitative data. The analysis process is “a highly idiosyncratic, intuitive, and lonely process, the success of which depends on the investigator’s sensitivity and analytical powers” according to Merriam (1998, p. 22). The effects of

'threats' to the process of analysis can be moderated with careful attention to the constructs of validity and credibility, even though these threats can never be completely avoided (Cohen et al., 2007).

### **Research validity and credibility**

In ensuring this study was both meaningful, constructive and authentic, it was important throughout the whole research process to target issues of validity, credibility and triangulation (Bush, 2007). The benefit of a sequential design approach is internal validity. By inviting students at the end of the focus group session for subsequent interviews, and requiring that participants contact me directly if they were interested in a follow-up interview, I improved internal validity between the focus group data and the interview data. I used both the focus groups and the individual interviews to answer my main research question: 'What is the experience of young women in high-decile, high performing single-sex girls' schools in relation to the current NCEA system in New Zealand?' Using the methodological approaches described above, I was able to gather a plethora of relevant data to answer this question. I was also able to answer my sub-questions: 'What do students perceive as their needs in order to reduce any negative affect associated with three years of almost continuous internal and external assessment?' and 'How can school leaders adjust systems and/or policies to enhance student wellbeing?' I offered to share the overall findings with the school leaders who were interested in improving their schools' focus on wellbeing. I aimed to enhance the validity of the global findings by applying the same data collection methods to each of the three different schools' data sets.

Bryman (2008) suggests using trial groups to test indicative questions as a form of measurement validity and so I did this after checking my questions carefully against the research aims. To enhance reliability, a purposive sampling process was used along with indicative questions for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Any potential variables for transferability were reduced by having only one researcher involved in the process. Validity and credibility are also enhanced with this heightened personal involvement, especially when appreciating the in-depth responses of individual participants. I was sure to keep the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in mind when conducting the focus groups and interviews, and ensured, as far as possible, that these situations were culturally sensitive and appropriate considering those principles.

As one of my aims was for the results to be of benefit to other high-decile, high performing single-sex girls' schools, it was important to have external validity through transferability. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that it is good practice to consider a problem from more than one angle so that the problem may be better understood and the results may offer the potential for transferring their application to similar contexts.

Another methodological strategy is that of triangulation, which has been identified as an especially appropriate strategy for feminist research (Cook & Fonow, 1986). In my study, I triangulated across data sources (different schools of different types) and by using different methods (focus groups followed by interviews). Triangulation is a validity enhancer and so was beneficial to my research for this reason also. By carefully reviewing data to assess its validity, I was able to achieve a form of triangulation (Bush, 2007). In this study, all the participants were asked the same questions. This meant that responses could be compared within schools, across schools and within and across participant groups. This is also acknowledged as a triangulation method. These multiple perspectives allowed for the interpretation of experiences of Year 13 girls in high-decile high performing single-sex schools to be assessed. Finally, by being able to assess that the different participants and different schools were making similar comments about their experiences, I could have greater confidence in the validity of my findings, as described by Davidson and Tolich, (2003).

I was able to achieve a more authentic account from focus group participants by establishing a positive connection. This was achieved, as Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest, by building trust, establishing rapport, asking quality questions and listening intently. By engaging these techniques, I hoped to solicit a more legitimate narrative from the student participants. In addition, I spent time before the interviews and focus groups began, explaining my reasons for undertaking this research and my experience as a Year 13 Dean in a similar school to theirs. These strategies aided the establishment of a climate within the session such that the participants felt at ease, focused and secure in their participation, which Ribbins (2007), suggests increases the likelihood of authentic and sincere responses.

When discussing the realities for these students in the individual interviews, it was also crucial that I establish authentic rapport and trust. According to Merriam (1998) "empathy is the foundation of support" (p. 23) and therefore is crucial in any interview.

The students' experiences and their wellbeing were discussed in depth in the interviews and so there was the possibility of sensitivity around disclosure for these participants. Therefore, it was essential for me to gain their trust and rapport so that the interviews had credibility and validity. The procedural steps taken in order to achieve this included conducting the interview at a time and place that the participant nominated, initiating text conversations in order to achieve this, and providing them with a copy of the transcript of the focus group they were a part of to go over before the interview started. In addition, I attempted to build rapport before the official interview began by discussing the research topic and my role as a concerned Year 13 Dean in a school similar to theirs. Another tactic suggested by Bell (2007) in order to build rapport and foster positive interaction is to place challenging or sensitive questions after the more general warm-up questions. This has the effect of 'warming' the participant up before more detailed questions are attempted, and gives more time to develop relationship, trust and rapport.

Other considerations included honesty and the avoidance of conflicts of interest. I ensured both schools and participants were fully informed of the research purpose, the focus group and interview process, the time commitment and the voluntary nature of the participation. In order to reduce "the risk of bias ... through respondent validation" (Scott & Morrison, 2006, p. 252), I established protocols to give transcripts of the focus group to interviewees for checking prior to the interview, and transcripts of the interview after the interview. This respondent validation is important for corroboration but also is effective in ensuring the trustworthiness of the points of view and the experiences of the participants (Bryman, 2008). It was also important to make certain that none of the student participants had any previous connection to me, either socially, personally or professionally. In addition, it was imperative that neither the participants nor I would receive any financial benefit from this research.

### **Researcher's bias and assumptions**

As a qualitative researcher it is important to clarify my own position in relation to the issue being studied. I have been the Year 13 Dean at a school that matches my research interest; in other words, at a high-decile, high performing single-sex girls' school, operating under the NCEA assessment system. In this capacity, I have seen a worrying number of my students with mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, suicidal

tendencies, anorexia and bulimia. My concern for these students has led me to question what it is about their experience of school that creates or magnifies these issues for them. I'm also aware that this seems to be happening in other similar schools, but nobody is talking about it. I suspect that schools are silent on this issue because of concerns over negative publicity in a performative environment - in other words, an environment that appears to value assessment results over all else. My underlying research philosophy is humanism, which places importance on the divergence of views, and a "belief in the value of the human experience and particularly its significance in creating what is meaningful" (Newby, 2010, p. 35). I am clearly connected to the experiences of these girls, and so acknowledge my "conscious partiality" (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p.9). Therefore, I am aware that I did not approach this research as a mere spectator, that "emphasizes neutrality and indifference towards subjects' lives" (Cook & Fonow, 1986, p. 9), but instead I endeavoured to make my position and partiality clear.

## **Summary**

The nature of my sequential design approach, along with my qualitative and feminist ontology, epistemology and methodology, all combine to create ethically sound conditions. Cashmore (2006) says that, when it comes to research with children, it must be "inclusive and respectful of their input and autonomy, using methodology that facilitates their participation; and it should do them no harm, protect their privacy and take account of their vulnerability" (p. 975). I believe my research design enabled these values through its qualitative, critical, feminist methodology and methods. The most authentic way to find out about the experiences and realities of Year 13 students in high-decile high performing single-sex schools was to ask the girls themselves. In-depth focus groups and interviews utilising a critically feminist qualitative approach were selected to equip these students with the opportunity to have their voices heard. The "rich" and "thick" data (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129) gathered from five focus groups and four interviews in three different schools will be presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the research data collected in three New Zealand secondary schools, through five focus groups, and four interviews, all with students in Year 13 in these high performing high-decile single-sex girls' schools. The focus groups comprised of between three and six participants. In total there were 22 participants from two different types of schools, (state and state-integrated), and a wide variety of cultures and abilities. Ethnicities represented included Pakeha, Māori, Indian, Sri Lankan, Asian, South African and Pasifika. All data were collected by the researcher and each interview and focus group was digitally recorded, transcribed and validated through the emergence of themes during analysis. A simple coding system was used to identify each group; the letters A, B and C were used to represent the three schools. 'FG' represents focus group and 'I' indicates interview. These codes are shown overleaf in table 4-1. It was clearly evident throughout the data collection that the experience of these students is one of almost constant stress and pressure, with significant social, emotional, physical and mental health consequences.

Seven main themes emerged from the focus groups in relation to the experience of Year 13 girls enrolled in NCEA in high performing high-decile single-sex schools. These are presented in Part One. They were: both positive and negative aspects of NCEA; the constant pressure to succeed; their experience of school; strategies used to cope; the effect of expectations; inequities; and, finally, suggestions for change for school leaders. Each of these themes are supported by identified sub themes. A summary of each of these findings are provided at the beginning of each section. The findings from the individual interviews are analysed in Part Two. The individual interviews have been broken down into three parts for discussion: the girls' experience of school in more detail than in the focus groups; their personal qualities of resilience; and their suggestions for change. This two-part analysis summarises the data and leads on to the Chapter Five discussion of this data in the light of the literature review in Chapter Two.

*Table 4-1* Focus group and interview allocation and codes

School Code	Focus Group		Interview	
School A	AFG1	AFG2	AI	-----
School B	BFG1	BFG2	BI1	BI2
School C	CFG	-----	CI	-----

## PART ONE

### NCEA positives and negatives

I began the focus groups by asking the girls what their experience of NCEA was like (see Appendix D). They described both positive and negative aspects of the assessment system in a balanced way and the data from this question are summarized below in Table 4-2. (√ = one or two comments, √√ = three or more comments).

*Table 4-2:* Theme 1: NCEA positive and negative aspects

Subthemes	AFG1	AFG2	BFG1	BFG2	CFG1
Positive aspects of NCEA	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Negatives aspects of NCEA	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√

### NCEA - perceptions of the ‘positives’

All participants were positive about being able to spread their assessments out over the year with NCEA, and that they didn’t have to rely on one end-of-year exam for their total result. Rose, from CFG, put it succinctly when she said: “It’s good that all the pressure isn’t on externals, like you work consistently throughout the year ... doing internals, and all the pressure is not on how well you do the externals”.

Two participants commented that they thought they had to give more in-depth answers than in other countries they had experienced or heard about. They liked being able to analyse material and felt that the criteria and guidelines were generally clear. Goals were also clear, and they felt good that many of them had already almost ‘passed’ (a

pass at Year 13 requires 80 Level 3 credits, 20 of which can and usually do come from the student's Level 2 credits the year before). One participant commented:

I think something I like about NCEA is the instruction that they have. It's clear and concise and it's to the point, like do this, this and this, and you'll get it. (Sia, AFG2)

They felt that 'mock' exams (practice exams usually held at the end of Term 3) were a safety net, in that they understood that these grades could be used if, for some reason, such as accident or illness, they were unable to sit the 'real' external exams in November. Students commented that the two previous years of NCEA assessments had prepared them for this, their final year. One student stated that:

I feel like Level 1 and Level 2 prepared me, prepared my stamina and how I need to study for this year. I know where to go, what resources to get and that came from doing it for two years (already). (Mary, BFG2)

Five participants thought only two years of assessment would be enough. There was a perception that the NCEA girls coped better at University than the 'Cambridge' boys (both School A and School B had 'brother' schools who used the Cambridge exam system).

Students who were not top academic students also liked the individual challenge that they got with NCEA. Hannah noted that:

I like it because you can challenge yourself and if you have a basic level of understanding you can still do well, even in comparison to someone with a ... better level and you just have to challenge yourself and I quite like that. (Hannah, BFG1)

However, the participants reported that their parents did not understand NCEA. Kahlia had the whole group in laughing recognition when she said:

Have you ever tried to explain NCEA to your parents? Oh my God. (Kahlia, AFG1)

### **NCEA – perceptions of the 'negatives'**

Discussion quickly turned in the focus groups to the aspects of NCEA that the students did not like. They felt that some criteria were completely random. They talked about memorising rote answers and losing a sense of holistic learning. Sia summed it up when she said:

I think I like how we've got internals and externals and it's kind of separated into little chunks, but at the same time you lose that holistic view of subject areas and unless you kind of do this naturally in your head where you connect the different parts together, it kind of gives you a fragmented view of that course. (Sia, AFG1)

The girls discussed the fact that they found it difficult to find out information about NCEA, a complicated system, at school, and that, as it was run in their school, it was unbalanced. Taryn noted that:

The hard thing is it's kind of ambiguous because NCEA is just like a structure and then the school takes it and they get to kind of... within the rules of it, use it how they want, so it really depends on what school you're at. The system itself, in my opinion, makes a lot of sense, but the school can take that and turn it into something... bigger and harder. (Taryn, AFG1)

All focus groups in all schools verbalised their frustration at the fact that they have to sit far too many internals, ending up with many more credits than they need, which adds to their stress. Cassandra's comment echoed many others of a similar vein:

I just think that with the internals and externals, especially at high achieving schools, we do way too many internals because we all want to do really well in every single internal that we do... I mean last year we did 120 credits worth of internals and you only need 80 to pass and 50 to get Excellence endorsed, which I guess a lot of us want, or Merit endorsed, that's still really good... but I just think that it's way too much and I think cutting that down a little bit would definitely make my experience so much better. (Cassandra, BFG2)

In School C, Kate thought she was doing 170 credits this year, despite the fact that students only need 60 Level 3 credits to pass Level 3 of NCEA. When I expressed surprise at this number she said "Yeah, maybe it's 140. I don't know. It's some crazy number but it's way, way, way more than I need".

### **The constant pressure to succeed**

After asking the first question, which was 'What is your experience of NCEA?' (See Appendix D), the girls initially talked about both the positive and negative aspects of their experience, from a relatively rational and distant perspective. Very quickly, however, the responses turned to describing an almost constant pressure to succeed. On analysis, this theme was divided into five subthemes: general negative feelings; negative mental and physical health consequences; negative social consequences; a

sense of unmanageability; and constant pressure from school. Table 4-3, below, shows the frequency with which these subthemes were raised

*Table 4-3: Theme 2: The constant pressure to succeed*

Subthemes	AFG1	AFG2	BFG1	BFG2	CFG1
Negative feelings (dread, fear, unpredictability, feeling overwhelmed)	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Negative physical and mental consequences (including sleep disruption and eating disruption)	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Negative social consequences	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Sense of unmanageability	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√

### **General negative feelings**

The students in the focus groups almost unanimously described their experience as one of seemingly constant stress and pressure. Eve’s comment was common:

I’m always, always, stressed and when I’m not I get stressed that I’m not stressed because I feel like I should be. (Eve, BFG1)

As they talked, they were able to describe the feelings that went with this stress. They used words like ‘dread’ and ‘worry’ and said that they felt ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘frustrated’. One student said “on a Sunday I dread coming to school. I’ve cried about coming to school” (Olive, AFG2). “Same, we all have” (Nicki, AFG2). Taryn once again summed up this pressure when she said:

It’s just constant pressure throughout the year...like you may seem like you’re really confident but inside you’re like Oh my God, oh my God, I’ve got so much stuff on but I’m just trying to keep [up]. (Taryn, AFG1)

In School C, a student commented that she knew “a lot of people that feel quite anxious in the school atmosphere, and it’s quite anxiety inducing for them” (Rose, CFG). They described negative self-talk, and how even when internal assessments were handed in, that didn’t mean the worry or stress eased; they then worried about the teacher marking their work and dreaded leaving something out. They described feeling vulnerable and constantly wondering if they’d done something wrong.

They talked about the stress created by the frequent ‘hooks’ that NCEA tripped them up with. There was a sense that by leaving out some small but crucial thing (a particular word, or formatting) their grades would suffer. This made them feel very vulnerable, which Cassandra attempted to verbalise:

it’s just the stress, ... you can have everything right in [the] Excellence [criteria], everything right in [the] Merit [criteria], make a tiny mistake [by missing something out of the achieved criteria] and get not-achieved. (Cassandra, BFG2)

The girls said that this kind of experience was “terrifying” (Vanessa, BFG2, Olive, AFG2) and “frustrating” (Mary, BFG2). One student then described a situation in which she had “worked really, really, really hard” for an internal assessment and she thought she had met the criteria for an Excellence grade:

Then I got it back and the teacher said ‘Your writing’s at Excellence level, but because you made two little mistakes on your graphs it got brought down to Achieved, but you were lucky that we brought you back up to Merit because your writing was so good’. I was just crushed. I cried for an hour, I had to leave class, and then my teacher tried to cheer me up and I just bawled my eyes out and my teacher didn’t know what to do with me so she sent me to the Dean’s office and I just continued crying. (Cassandra, BFG2)

Other girls described similar feelings. Ana, (BFG2) said “It can be heartbreaking though, like I literally feel heartbroken” and Mary (BFG2) added, that if they didn’t get an Excellence grade, “it feels like you’ve let the entire world down, even though it’s not as cataclysmic as that”. They described how this sense of failure then affected their confidence, and they felt a great sense of disappointment in themselves, often, because they received a Merit grade instead of an Excellence grade. When they then cried in class because of disappointment or stress they said it felt “embarrassing... you feel like everything has gone to shit... I can’t even keep myself together. It’s degrading” (Ana, BFG2).

The fear of failure was also a negative feeling that came up frequently. The students often resorted to similes to describe how the constant stress and pressure of school and NCEA made them feel a sense of being overwhelmed and powerless: “It’s like that monster the Hydra in Greek mythology, you chop off one head...” (Mary, BFG2), “And sometimes you just feel like a monkey in a pack of lions” (Catrina, AFG2), “I just feel like I’m preparing myself for an avalanche to fall down on top of me” (Vanessa, BFG2).

### **Negative mental and physical health consequences**

By far the biggest response in this category was the impact of stress and pressure on the amount and quality of sleep that the students report getting. In fact, every student in every focus group talked about lack of sleep and the effect of that on their lives. Other factors were disruptions to eating well, anxiety, depression and a range of physical symptoms including migraines, nausea, stomach problems, lethargy, mood disruptions, eye degeneration and back problems.

All participants commented on how they sacrificed sleep in order to complete school-work; usually for internal assessments but also for homework and studying for tests, as well as preparing for their extra-curricular responsibilities. Lack of sleep then resulted in getting sick, which meant they got behind with their school-work, which meant more stress and less sleep. So, a vicious cycle, which Hannah described:

When I'm tired nothing functions the next day and so it sucks when you sacrifice sleep because when I'm sleep deprived I get more stressed and then I get .... sick and then you're more on edge and you can't focus so you try and go to bed earlier the next night, but you have other things to do and it's kind of like a cycle and you just get stuck and you can't sleep because you're thinking about what you've got to do next day. (Hannah, BFG1)

'All-nighters' was a term every focus group in every school used. Either the participants themselves stayed awake all night, or their friends did, with consequences for focus and attention. Liza and Hannah described it like this:

I've lost count of the times where I just pull all-nighters, and I cannot go back to sleep. Or like, I might not sleep for two days, and don't even realise. I can't remember like, today, I didn't even know it was Thursday. (Liza, AFG2)

People send you snapchats at about 5 in the morning being like 'finally finished'. The next day they come to school and they look really tired and they've drunk tons of coffee and stuff to keep them awake and you know they're gonna crash. (Hannah, BFG1)

They agreed that there was a combination of causes for the all-nighters, but although "they get their work done... it sucks that they had to stay up that late" (Hannah, BFG1).

A number of students admitted that they "actually physically can't" (Nicola, BFG1) stay up all night, but there emerged the notion that to stay up until midnight was normal, as

was falling asleep in class. Cassandra described how staying up until midnight or 1am was normal:

Sometimes I've stayed up all night to do internals but usually if I'm studying I wouldn't stay up later than 12 or 1 and for homework I wouldn't stay up later than 12. (Cassandra, BFG2)

Many girls noted that over commitments to extra-curricular activities, which many of them felt they had to do in order to strengthen their University scholarship applications, added to the lack of sleep. Parents became concerned about this, and the stress caused by sleep deprivation contributed to the vicious cycle:

I just joined everything this year and now I'm just like there's no time for like breaks or sleep or anything and it's just like a constant go-go-go. Like there's not one minute you can just sit down and go like – okay. Like if you have eight hours sleep one night it's like an accomplishment (laughter) and it's like this big thing because we rarely get that. I speak for a lot of Year 13s when barely anyone gets a solid eight hours of sleep consistently because when it does happen we're super stoked about it. (Vanessa, BFG2)

I've had to sit with my parents at three o'clock in the morning, doing work and they're just like 'what are you doing with your life?' I'm like, 'well, trying to pass'. And then the next day, they are just like, you shouldn't have stayed up last night, and I was like, well, I have to pass you know. (Catrina, AFG2)

I was up until 2am this morning doing it, not because I didn't start it on time, I'm not one to leave things to the last minute, but I physically couldn't gather my thoughts and I'd been writing it for ages and it's just I really, really wanted Excellence. So I stressed myself out about that, which meant that I couldn't write because I was stressed. (Nicola, BFG1)

Other students also described being paralysed by stress. Eve described it like this:

When I'm stressed sometimes I physically can't make myself work. It's like procrastination but at the same time I'm so stressed and I have so much to do that I can't work and I try and do stuff and it just doesn't come out right. It's not me slacking off and just hanging out with my friends instead, it's I physically can't do it. I think some teachers don't understand that, they just see it as me not trying my hardest when really I'm trying really, really hard. (Eve, BFG1)

The stress and lack of sleep was also blamed for other physical consequences. Olive and Cassandra's comments were typical:

I've got really bad tension migraines from not sleeping or staring at my books or long periods of typing things up and it got to the point where I was like is this all really worth it? Is all this pain, just to get through this one year really worth it? (Olive, AFG1)

It's just this feeling you get in your stomach because I tend to get a bit anxious about things and you just get that feeling in your stomach and it doesn't go away. It's constantly clenched and you're tense. (Cassandra, BFG2)

Another concerning pattern was that of not eating, usually because of time pressures. One student was also involved in so many extra-curricular activities at lunchtime that she "just stopped bringing lunch because there was no point" (Mary, BFG2). More concerning were the admissions of more serious mental health consequences, which the girls saw as directly related to the stress and pressure of school. Ana opened up about her struggles:

I've been diagnosed with depression and anxiety through the Kari Centre. It's obviously not something I talk about a lot ... The entire concept of school, it's a nice concept in theory, and it's fun when you first start out, but then as you go on you start to realise how much of your life is actually apparently hanging on to these couple of years where you're just sitting and trying to absorb all this information. The pressure is building up where you think if you're going to forget one thing then that's it, you're done. (Ana, BFG2)

Another participant spoke about her older sister, who had had a break-down in Year 13 due to stress and anxiety, and was off school for a month. She then spoke about her own anxiety:

I get really anxious about exams and you just can't help it. I haven't been diagnosed with anxiety or anything so it's not as bad as some people but I definitely struggle with it and have panic attacks and breathing problems and stuff. I went to the Doctor and it all stemmed from being anxious and stressed. (Cassandra, BFG2)

### **Negative social consequences**

Participants talked about the negative social consequences of the constant stress and pressure of school and NCEA, and discussed how it affected their friendships, their relationships with their teachers and their family relationships. Some friendships suffered when stressed friends isolated themselves, sometimes because of emotional stress, and other times because they were so busy with all their extra-curricular activities that they missed out on socialising with their friends. Hannah described her experience with one of her friends:

One of my friends, she is so stressed out all the time, she puts so much pressure on herself, she gets pressure put on her from school. I never see her, we never saw her at lunchtimes or anything and we say let's hang out and she bails at the last minute, not because she doesn't want to come but because she's so stressed with the work she has to do that she just can't do it. (Hannah, BFG1)

Other friendships suffered because of the competition for grades. The participants in Hannah's group all agreed with her when she said:

I just don't like how some people... they don't do it on purpose necessarily, but they'll whine about how their grade isn't good enough while you have a lower grade and you're like wow, do you know how you're making me feel? (Hannah, BFG1)

Friendships in general suffered because of the constant focus on assessments. Hannah spoke for her group again:

Most conversations between... like anyone that I talk to, start off with 'how was your internal'? It doesn't start off with 'how was your weekend'? Then it will come up with 'studying all weekend, I didn't get to go out'. (Hannah, BFG1)

Relationships with teachers also suffered because the students perceived that the teachers were also stressed, and so "you don't really want to approach them with your own stress" (Vanessa, BFG2). Family relationships suffered too. Mary and Catrina's comments were common:

I don't remember the last time I actually sat down with my parents and hung out because I'm always studying. (Mary, BFG2)

I'm not really involved in my siblings' or my parents' lives. It's like I don't want this to happen, but it just has to happen ... because it's like this. (Catrina, AFG2)

### **A sense of unmanageability**

Throughout all the focus groups, a strong sense that what was expected of them was unmanageable was evident from all the participants. They felt that they had "no free time" (Jo, AFG1, Liza, AFG2), and no time to themselves which added to their feelings of stress. Eve spoke of the irony she experienced:

It's funny. They say take time to yourself and do exercise and stuff, but for each subject you need to do at least an hour of homework every night. So, you're supposed to be running at midnight? When do you take time for yourself? (Eve, BFG1)

Others described this unmanageability as constantly "juggling so much" (Nicki, AFG2). The biggest source of this stress was having internal assessments all due at the same time, sometimes the same week, and sometimes even the same day. Even too many spread over two weeks caused stress and a sense that despite doing everything right, the participants were still not coping. Catrina described a time in the previous year:

It was so stressful, everything was crammed to half way through the term, and every deadline I had, was within two weeks of each other, like within the two weeks I think I had Social Studies one day, Business the next day, and then the next week I had English. I was just, oh, my gosh. How to live like [that]?... and I maximize my time as well. My study periods were used so effectively and I do work, and I'll try to prioritise, but I get so exhausted. (Catrina, AFG2)

In addition to the very strong message about internals being on at the same time, was the fact that teachers are expecting them to work on their internal assessments at home, (more so than in Year 12 when they had more class time to work on their internal assessments), but in addition were also asking them to "just complete this essay, or this report for your actual report', and then it's like, well which one am I supposed to focus on, if every teacher's doing that?" (Olive, AFG2).

Participants found times when they had been sick very difficult to cope with, as they tried to catch up, but because internal assessments happen throughout the year, they could never get clear after being behind. Nicola described being sick, but having to come back to school despite not having recovered fully:

I fell behind earlier in the year because I had glandular fever and I was off school for a week... I couldn't have been off school for any more, I had to come to school even though I was still really sick. That pushed everything back... so everything kind of got pushed together, which meant I did an average job of everything instead of a good job, which was hard. (Nicola, BFG1)

The participants also talked about how they felt that things were constantly building-up and they didn't feel in control. Despite being told to 'prioritise', they felt that teachers didn't understand what they were getting from all their other subjects as well. Two students described it like this:

The build-up of internals sometimes gets a bit much and when teachers don't understand that you do have other subjects that require attention and [they] say you need to make this internal your absolute priority and an hour later you're in another class and someone is saying you have to make this internal your absolute priority. (Hannah, BFG1)

Internals just kind of pile up on top of each other and other teachers sometimes seem to forget that you have other classes that give you homework as well. (Eve, BFG1)

In School B and School C, there were no overall assessment calendars, which meant that the students were constantly wondering what was coming next, and they couldn't plan ahead, because they didn't know what was up ahead. Even individual subject teachers who did provide assessment dates, would say that they were "estimated" and they "changed sometimes" (Hannah, BFG1). This feeling of unpredictability added to their stress.

### **Constant school pressure**

In all three schools there existed a culture of success, resulting in students feeling constant pressure to be a high achiever, which in most cases meant getting Excellences (E's). It was clear that the school culture and individual teachers created a feeling in the students that Merits (M's) weren't good enough. Eve's comment was common:

If I was to get a Merit, I'd be like... that is not what I was going for and that's not actually good enough for my standards at the moment ... that's not good enough ... it affects you and it sucks. (Eve, BFG1)

One student described a friend who got a Merit+ on an assessment: "She goes 'I'd rather not have it... it's a Merit+, it's so close to Excellence, I'd rather not have it'" (Hannah, BFG1). All students agreed with the Ana's comment that a Merit felt like a failure:

You'll get an Excellence and you'll be like okay whatever and then you'll get a Merit and then it's like you've failed. (Ana, BFG2)

In School B, the participants commented that the issue of girls comparing grades and rank scores with each other caused stress, as did the high emphasis in assemblies on top achievers. Vanessa described the disappointment she and her peers experienced:

Because we're in this environment where so many girls before us have already gotten such good grades, that's something that always comes up in assemblies, oh look at the past results. I remember once in assembly Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ brought up that our grades had dropped a little from last year and everyone was like wait, what? We worked really hard and all of a sudden that's just been thrown out the window because we didn't achieve as well as last year did. (Vanessa, BFG2)

At this school, I was surprised that it was not just getting an Excellence endorsement that mattered, it went further than that to the *number* of Excellence credits students had. So, although a student might have NCEA endorsed with Excellence at Level 3 by getting 50 Excellence credits, this almost didn't count at this school, because so many students with 100 Excellence credits, or more, were paraded as examples and role models at assemblies. The rationale that the students seemed to understand was that by getting more 'E' credits, they would have a better chance of getting into a 'good' university. Mary and Eve described it like this:

Also the threshold is so high, especially in high decile schools, you can get Excellence endorsement which is considered amazing in a lot of schools, but then it kind of becomes a smaller deal when we see our top scholars with 100 excellence credits, 120, and then you just say yeah I worked my hardest but there are people who are so much better... the threshold is always so high that it's so hard to match it, especially with the people who have come before us as well. (Mary, BFG2)

By getting good grades I can get into a good university, I can get a good job, I can be on a secure pathway in my life so when I don't get good grades it's super easy for me to get super upset and then the anxiety just builds and builds and builds. It sucks...The teachers are constantly putting pressure on you to get into a good university and to do stuff and even when you don't know what you're doing they're still telling you that's what you need to do. (Eve, BFG1)

### **Experience of school**

When I asked the girls about whether NCEA was balanced and manageable in their school, the girls in all focus groups talked about their experience of school, frequently and in detail. The data from this question and theme are summarized overleaf in Table 4-4.

*Table 4-4: Theme 3: Experience of school*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>AFG1</b>	<b>AFG2</b>	<b>BFG1</b>	<b>BFG2</b>	<b>CFG1</b>
Support (and lack of it)	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Focus on appearances	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Contradictory experiences	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
School culture pressure	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Systems that hinder	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
'Passing' not 'learning'	√	√	√	√	---

There were significant differences in the students' experiences of their schools. Most of this difference seemed to emanate from the students' perceptions about how and if they were supported in their stressful and pressured school lives. School A students felt that the main motivation of the teachers and leaders was based on how the school looked to outsiders, whether that be physically, in their uniform, or how the school was perceived by outsiders, for example in published results. All focus groups talked about the contradictions they believed they experienced daily within schools, and how the school culture of success was both an aid in achieving high grades and a deterrent to wellbeing. Students felt that some systems within their schools needed to change, and some talked about the compartmentalising of learning, and how they were working to pass, not working to learn.

### **Support (and lack of it)**

There was an interesting difference between the schools when the issue of support arose. The focus groups in School A were very vocal in describing their perception of a lack of support in the school for them. This perhaps was a result of different school cultures. School A students were adamant that the school culture was all about appearances and results, at the expense of student wellbeing. School B and C students indicated more appreciation of the support they received from counsellors, Deans and teachers. However even these students also acknowledged that this support didn't change the high-stress culture or the consequences of such a culture.

In all three schools, students said that their Deans were supportive and that they mostly had positive relationships with them. Six students in Schools A and B also said that School Counsellors were helpful and supportive, however two in School C said that they did not want to be seen going to the School Counsellor as it might imply a weakness which they were reluctant to expose. One girl at School C admitted that she had needed the support of a counsellor, but had gone outside of school to get that support.

Participants in all schools admitted that there were ‘some’ teachers (“very few, one out of ten”, Leyla, AFG1) who were aware of the stress they were under and who were empathetic and supportive, however these teachers were too few and far between, and the girls wished that more teachers were like that. Leyla was so happy with one of her teachers:

There’s my Chem teacher, Miss \_\_\_\_\_, oh my God, bless her soul, she’s so lovely. She always asks ‘How are you guys doing’?... but obviously, I think there should be more teachers like that who actually understand. (Leyla, AFG1)

By far the most common responses when it came to their experience of school were those that indicated that the girls in School A felt unsupported. They felt their decisions made in order to stay sane or balanced were not supported, and that although the school was starting to talk a lot about wellbeing, the talk did not translate into action. One high achieving student who was part of the academic mentoring programme (reserved for the top 3% of students), described in some detail a situation in which she found herself under too much pressure due to a combination of internal assessments and personal issues. With the support of her Mum, she decided to not complete one three credit internal. She was then called in to the Dean’s office:

Last week I made the decision to not hand in Biology because it was three times the amount of work for an art subject, which is quite a heavy subject. It was only worth three credits and it got to the stage where it was like even though I’d met all the checkpoints and every week I have a really intense schedule, I’m amazing at time management, but other things cropped up. Then when it came to actually finishing it I was just like actually I just need to just give myself a break. So I didn’t hand it in and then I got called up to the Deans and they were just at me for 10, 15 minutes asking me why I did it. I explained why, I said look this is what was going on, this is how I’d prepared for it. I made the decision for myself for my health and wellbeing, which I thought they would listen to (laugh)... and

then they just totally shut me down. For me I was really disappointed about that because it was like here you are saying one thing and we've got this great system, but it's kind of being abused because you're not supported. (Jo, AFG1)

She went on to say that because she is a high-achiever, "I just feel like I'm treated like a part of the school brand – like oh, you're our money-maker, that's how I feel" (Jo, AFG1). These School A students also described feeling that the school did not support any of their endeavours outside of school, and their perception was that if the school didn't get any credit for it then they didn't want to know about it. Taryn said "With my skiing... I was going to do this training programme where I was going to miss half of every Friday and they were 'No, it's not good enough because you are not competing for the school'" (Taryn, AFG1).

Another student described her experience after she quit the school rowing team and joined a club team. She was selected to compete in the National event, but was refused representative leave despite meeting all the criteria to be eligible for representative leave.<sup>3</sup> This student's perception was that "they were not happy with it because they didn't get the recognition for it" (Leyla, AFG1).

In general girls in all schools sensed that teachers, Deans and counsellors were aware of the stress the girls were under, but didn't actually do anything to help change things. They also felt that teachers were not aware of their actual workload, and were only aware of what they had to do for that one class.

And they don't see what we do at home, you know. They don't see how many hours we put in behind the scenes. (Liza, AFG2)

All they have to say is prioritise, prioritise, prioritise. (Nicki, AFG2)

One student at School B described an instance of a teacher not understanding or caring about commitments and priorities in other classes:

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<sup>3</sup> In NCEA, if you are on 'representative' leave, you have permission to hand internal assessments in at another time. If you are on 'self-interest' leave, there is no contingency made for you to sit your internal assessments at another time, you just have to miss them and miss out on those credits, which has implications for things like prize-giving, scholarships and so on.

For drama we had to have a practice at one of the lunchtimes and I couldn't go to it because I was like 'Miss, I've got an art design internal due [tomorrow] and I need to print everything because printing takes forever'. When I told her that she didn't get it. She was like 'No, it [drama] should be a priority, you should be committing, you're not doing well blah, blah, blah'. I was like 'I can't help it', genuinely I've been working really well, they [art design internals] just take a lot of time and if something's due the next day I'm not going to do the thing that's not, you know, [I] need to prioritise. (Nicola, BFG1)

All focus groups talked about the seeming disconnect between teachers and Deans telling them to prioritise, but really only wanting them to prioritise their own subject. They didn't like it if another subject was prioritised over their own. On the other hand, there were examples of teachers who were prepared to change due dates in order to spread the workload for the students out more if they were aware that the whole class was under a lot of pressure from other subjects.

The students unanimously talked about the difficulty of being sick and how being away impacted on their stress levels. Even with empathetic support from Deans and counsellors, the reality of still having to fit in all the assessments they'd missed, as well as catching up on teaching and learning created more stress for them. One student described applying for leave to have her impacted wisdom teeth removed. When she asked what contingencies she would be allowed from NZQA, her Dean said "Because it's a long-term illness, if you miss school, then you miss the internals or the deadlines, that's your problem". The student said she felt that was "pretty tough" because she hadn't known about her impacted teeth for long at all, and needed the surgery urgently as it was "really sore actually" (Olive, AFG2).

Some students described requesting to drop a subject because they were finding the workload too much. This was particularly relevant in School C, the state-integrated school, as the girls there were required to take Religious Education, a full credit internally assessed course, as well as five other subjects, meaning their workload was immediately 20% higher than in the state schools. Rose, in School C, described the difficulty and lack of support she felt when she dropped her sixth subject last year in Year 12:

It was a really big deal to drop one subject, and the teachers and administration made me feel as though it was a really terrible thing that I'd done, and like 'That's not the way we do things here, we don't give up'. I was just in stress, and it was going to be impossible for me to do well. (Rose, CFG)

Rose went on later in the focus group session to reveal that she had had to seek help for her mental health outside of school, and the school did not know about this. She was required to take six subjects this year, but would rather have been doing five, as she felt "I would be able to definitely get an Excellence endorsement if I was doing five subjects", but it was impossible with the added pressure of six. Another student in the focus group at School C said she had asked about doing only five subjects at the beginning of the school year, but was told "no". The students at this school were aware of a number of students who had dropped a subject, but that it was treated very "hush-hush":

It's kept very secretive and they're not allowed to talk about it because if the rest of us hear that that's what they're doing we might all want to do that. I think the teachers' kind of in a way see it as giving up or we don't really care because we just want to drop subjects, but that's not true. We are just trying to get the best results that we can. (Anna, CFG)

This also occurred in School A. Kahlia described her experience like this:

I tried to drop a subject because I already did another Level 3 one last year and I was like it's just stressing me out so much. I've got tension migraines. But she [the Dean] was like, 'No, you can't do anything about it, even if your teacher's bad you just have to get other notes'. (Kahlia, AFG1)

### **Focus on appearances**

The students in School A were very vocal about their perceptions that the school was only interested in looking good, whether that be through the new uniform or the focus on high achievement in both academic and extra-curricular endeavours. There was certainly a sense that the school was "biased towards people that are going to make the school proud and get Excellences (Sia, AFG1), and that "it seems like they are just focusing on statistics" (Taryn, AFG1). They described how the competitive academic vibe adds to their stress:

It's always like you have to be at the top or at least in the upper quartile or whatever. If you're not good at something, then everyone's kind of like 'why are you here?' (Kahlia, AFG1)

Five others described feeling invisible because of the high emphasis on publicly acknowledging outstanding success, in newsletters and on a prominent neon message board at the front of the school.

### **Contradictory experiences**

Both School A and School B have started work on wellbeing. The students talked about how they are hearing about it in assemblies and are talking about it in house meetings. However, perhaps because both schools are only at the beginning stages of addressing wellbeing issues, the girls were frustrated by the contradictions they frequently experienced. Eve and Vanessa, in different focus groups, but from the same school, described these contradictions like this:

I almost find it comical that at school, especially in the first couple of years of NCEA, they'll have assemblies about wellbeing and making sure that you're taking time after school to do some exercise or hang out with a friend or have a life and then there's so much pressure to make sure you get your internal in on time. Sitting in assembly and when there's (sic) teachers up there saying make sure that you take time for yourself and then you'll go to class and they'll say make sure you spend all weekend doing this. It's almost laughable. (Eve, BFG1)

So in terms of reducing stress, all these stress talks that have been happening when they're just saying just be less stressed, I don't know how helpful it's being because it's like yeah be less stressed and here's five internals that are due, mocks<sup>4</sup> are coming up in five weeks and dah, dah, dah. So I don't know if having all these talks is actually helping because yes you hear it and you're like yes okay, you're aware of the fact that you need to be less stressed. I know I need to be more calm and that I need to get more sleep and I know things I need to improve, it's just either that or getting a good grade. Or actually finishing the assignment or even passing the ... test. (Vanessa, BFG2)

### **School Culture**

School A participants, who were generally more negative about the support they received at school, also expressed a desire for a more cohesive school culture. For

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<sup>4</sup> 'Mocks' are the practice external exams that happen usually towards the end of Term three. In circumstances when the student is unable to sit the formal external exam in November, because of illness, injury or trauma, her 'mock' exam results are used to provide her with 'derived' grades.

example, the girls at all schools talked about the conflict between spending time on internal assessments versus spending time on studying or homework and the tension created when they couldn't do both and chose to work on the internal. Girls at School A received a detention for not completing homework, while those at School B and School C did not. There seemed to be more of an understanding from the teachers in these schools that the girls were under stress and had to make decisions about how to spend their time. One of the things discussed at a house meeting at School A was how an improved school culture could help improve wellbeing. Jo elaborated on her perceptions of the problem:

One of the things we discussed last week was the thing that we're missing that creates a good wellbeing environment is school culture. Why is it missing? Because we don't have form class culture. Why is that missing? Because in Year 9 there's no big event like a beach day or a camp that brings everyone together. (Jo, AFG1)

The focus group went on to discuss the lack of a feeling of community at the school and the lack of any sense of fun; for example, prank week is banned: "If you do pranks you will be expelled" (Taryn, AFG1). They compared this to other schools they knew of that had special activities for Year 13s on their final day and felt that in comparison they had nothing to look forward to. Leyla confirmed their feelings when she said:

It's like you're under stress but then they've got that to look forward to. With us it's like what do we have to look forward to? (Leyla, AFG1)

## **Systems**

The most common complaint about their experience of school and NCEA in all focus groups was the fact that more often than not, assessments happened at the same time, usually within one or two weeks of each other, and this, more than any other thing caused the girls the most stress. They believed that this was a result of bad planning and lack of consultation between departments at the school, so they felt that no-one really knew that, for example, they had five internal assessments all due in the last week of term. Schools B and C did not have an assessment calendar, so adding to the stress was the fact that the girls didn't know what was coming up. Eve and Kate's comments were typical:

Time management is really important, but it's hard when you don't know what you need to manage. You can only know what you know and the teachers don't really like telling you about internals that are coming up. (Eve, BFG1)

All the internals always seem to fall at the same time, for every subject, and there is supposed to be an internal [assessment] calendar but I don't even know if the teachers go by it. (Kate, CFG)

In addition, it was the seemingly deliberate placement of internals immediately before or after 'mock' (practice) exams that was particularly stressful, as were internals that were due immediately before or after the Ball, the highlight of the girls' social calendar. Vanessa described their sense of powerlessness in these situations:

I remember last year during mocks and around mocks there was an internal due a week before mocks, there was (sic) mocks and then the Eco [economics] internal due right after mocks. Those four weeks, the entire month, it was just so incredibly stressful. I don't know how to manage it properly and I don't know if that's something maybe the school could help on, I don't know. (Vanessa, BFG2)

They also felt that compared to other years they were 'left to their own devices' and not supported through assessments as they had been before. Eliza commented:

They give you an internal and then they, like, that's it, they give it to you and then you have to figure [it] out for yourself. (Eliza, CFG)

Other aspects of school systems that caused stress were for those girls who were involved in many co-curricular activities, and/or had leadership roles within the school. Ana and Mary described their experiences of this:

I had community week going on, which was an event we were hosting together throughout the school, then I had two tests on Monday, an internal on Tuesday, I had another test on Thursday and another internal due on Friday, while I had to organise that whole event and I had to manage the accounts of the event I had held last week. So it was all in that one week and that was the worst week of my life. I never want to do that again. (Ana, BFG2)

I have a meeting every lunchtime every week, so there's no time for lunch specifically, so I eat everything at morning tea to a point where I get really hungry after school... meetings are mis-timed quite a bit. (Mary, BFG2)

When questioned further, Mary admitted that no-one in the school knew she had a meeting every lunchtime and wasn't eating lunch.

### **‘Passing’ not ‘learning’**

Finally, possibly the most concerning finding about the students’ experience of school was the comment that came up many times about the quality of their learning. Although all the students were successful in NCEA, many of them endorsed with Excellence at Levels 1 and 2, there was a sense from them that they were not learning, but just memorizing exemplars or regurgitating rote learning. Liza described it like this:

That’s the thing. I don’t retain it. We’re working towards passing, we’re not working for knowledge. But we’re just writing, and we’re looking at what we have to put inside our heads, and we are just putting it there. We’re not even analysing what we’re learning, we just want to get that thing in, and get it over and done with. (Liza, AFG2)

### **Expectations**

Although I didn’t have a specific question about expectations, students in all schools talked about the impact of expectations on their stress levels. These expectations came from their parents, their school, their peers and themselves. The data from these responses are below in Table 4-5.

*Table 4-5: Theme 4: Expectations*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>AFG1</b>	<b>AFG2</b>	<b>BFG1</b>	<b>BFG2</b>	<b>CFG1</b>
Parent expectations	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
School expectations	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Peer expectations	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Self-expectations	√√	√√	√√	√√	√

### **Parents**

There was a balance of responses about parents’ expectations from those whose parents encouraged them to take mental health days off, to those who showed displeasure at any grade that wasn’t an Excellence. Those who felt pressure from their parents’ expectations talked about how they felt that their parents lived through their daughters, hoping they would achieve what the parents had not.

Three of the Asian girls who were immigrants to this country expressed an understanding that their parents had sacrificed so much to give their daughters the opportunities that they never had, and so the pressure to be successful was intensified. Nicki said this:

Also as well it's the high decile thing. Our parents, they've worked really hard to get to where we are now and they've got that expectation for us. I could be like I want to do a degree in history and my parents will be 'No, you're better than that; we worked too hard for you to go and do that'. But it's like that's what I want to do. 'No, be an engineer or a doctor.' (Nicki, AFG1)

The girls felt their parents' disappointment keenly, and others were more worried about their parents' reaction to a grade that wasn't an E than they were disappointed for themselves. Both Sia and Kahlia spoke about the effects of this experience:

It's really degrading hearing your parents saying they're disappointed in the grades you got and you want to work harder but it's like there's only so much you can do. (Sia, AFG1)

You're not doing it for yourself, you're doing it for your parents and when I get a Merit I don't think oh my God I'm so disappointed, I'm like holy shit what are my parents going to say? (Kahlia, AFG1)

There were several comments that indicated that parents were conflicted, between having high expectations for their daughters and concurrently realising that their daughters were under significant stress and wanting to ease that for them. Other parents were less conflicted, and were very supportive of their daughters having time off to manage all the internal assessments. Kahlia and Liza described these two opposite reactions:

My parents want me to get good grades and then when I actually ... I'm trying so hard to get good grades but then I'm also stressed out and freaking out [and] they're like 'Why are you stressing'? It's like you've put this expectation [on me], you want me to do this, and then whenever I crack you're like 'Don't stress, there's nothing to be stressed about.' (Kahlia, AFG1)

Mine would allow me to [take a day off], because they can see how much it's affecting me, mentally, emotionally and how much it's affecting my health. They want me to be at home and to have a rest. I work better at home and they know that; and they want me to have that day at home to do as much work as possible because they know when I get here, it's too hard for me to focus. (Liza, AFG2)

Students talked about parents who didn't understand the connection between expectations and stress. They described times when their parents said the grade they achieved was not good enough, including saying that a Merit was not good enough, and their daughter should have achieved an Excellence.

### **School**

Pressure from expectations at school came from both individual teachers, and the whole school culture of success. Girls described feeling that they had to work harder for their credits than at other schools because teachers said things like "we want to challenge you at our school, you know, we're a high performing school" (Sia, AFG1).

Others reiterated the idea that the staff did know about the stress the girls were under, but contradicted that by demanding high achievement. Ana and Vanessa said:

I don't necessarily blame the school and the teachers for it, I think I just blame this whole culture for a lot of the different aspects of the school that do create this stress in people and the expectations to succeed. (Vanessa, BFG2)

So when it comes to NCEA and expectations from teachers and expectations from school and stuff like that, it's just really hard on you because you want to do well but you also want to be mentally stable and I just can't do both at once. (Ana, BFG2)

### **Peers**

Peers also added to the pressure of school by constantly talking about grades and about who got what. Relationships were affected because of jealousy over grades and girls felt guilty about getting an 'E' (Excellence grade) when their friend did not. Among their peers, they 'hype' each other up and an 'E' becomes the norm; an 'M' (Merit grade) feels like failure. Mary explained this:

I think the school puts expectations on us but I think I do also blame myself for a lot of the expectations that I put on it and also it's not even just the teachers, I feel like a lot of the girls at our school, like around internals, we all get so hyped up and we're asking each other, 'What did you do for this?' 'What did you do for that?' 'Oh I think I did that wrong!' Everyone just is hyped and I think we hype each other up because there's that culture. (Mary, BFG2)

### **Self**

As in the quote above, the girls also place high expectations on themselves which has implications for stress when they don't get that aimed for 'Excellence' grade. Eve put it this way:

Merit is like okay, good job. Excellence is like that's amazing and that's what everyone wants. (Eve, BFG1)

In these high achieving schools, there are consequences for those who are not so academically able which seem to be tied to the notion that an 'A' is not good enough. These same girls would possibly be seen as very successful at another school, but because of the culture of high achievement in the school they are in, they see themselves as failures. Vanessa described this situation:

I know a lot of girls who...don't have high expectations of themselves because they've just been [going] through the motions and they're like I'm not gonna even try because if I can't do high school well then what's the point of even attempting university? I feel like that's a really sad turn of events for some fresh faced young girls who come into high school really excited for what the future can bring to [becoming] just really cranky, grumpy Year 13s [thinking] 'and what's the point now?'. It's sad and I wish it wasn't like that, but here we are, everyone's just in a bit of a rut, everyone's kind of a mess. (Vanessa, BFG2)

Even the high achieving students at School B felt that their success wasn't good enough because they expected to achieve *more* Excellence credits.

Last year I got ‘E’-endorsed<sup>5</sup> with I think about 60 Excellence credits, but for me I was like I could have gotten more Excellence credits, I could have gotten more because you look at the scholars and you’re like they got 100 Excellence credits, why can’t I get more? (Cassandra, BFG2)

## Inequities

Another strong theme that emerged from the data was the perception by the participants that NCEA was a fundamentally unjust system, with many inconsistencies. This meant that they perceived it as more difficult to achieve a standard, (preferably with Excellence) at their high-decile high achieving single-sex school than it was in other schools. There were other aspects of the assessment system that they felt were unfair and inequitable. They also had some concerns about how teachers or school leaders added to the inequity. The data that emerged for this theme is shown below in Table 4-6.

*Table 4-6: Theme 5: Inequities*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>AFG1</b>	<b>AFG2</b>	<b>BFG1</b>	<b>BFG2</b>	<b>CFG1</b>
Inequities within NCEA	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Inequities between teachers	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Inequities between schools	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Inequities inherent in systems	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√

## NCEA

A lot of the concern raised here was about the little ‘hooks’ described above that the students felt unfairly tripped them up. This caused them to feel that they were unjustly denied higher grades. They were also concerned about the seeming discrepancy in the numbers of credits allocated to different standards in different subjects, for example a three-credit internal in English might require many more hours of work than a six-credit internal in Geography. Mary and Nicki provided these examples:

<sup>5</sup> Students can ‘endorse’ at each level of NCEA, by attaining 50 credits over all their subjects at either Merit level, (or above), or at Excellence level. Most students at these schools are aiming for an Excellence endorsement.

A recent physics internal we did was ridiculously marked. You got Achieved, Merit and Excellence but if you forgot to draw your line straight... so you had everything [in the criteria for] Excellence but if your line's not straight you got Not Achieved. (Mary, BFG2)

We did our simultaneous equations internal and at the same time I was doing my geography internal for Polyfest. Both of them were worth three credits and I probably studied around two hours' maximum for simultaneous equations, but I spent over ten hours doing my Polyfest and I stayed up until 2 o'clock[am]. (Nicki, AFG1)

They said that because the workload was mostly unmanageable, they had to choose where they spent their time, and so could only give 50% of their effort and time to any particular standard, instead of the 100% that they would like to give it. This resulted in frustration and a sense that their results were not necessarily a true reflection of their understanding or ability, but more a reflection of how many other internal assessments they had due the same week. Eve described it like this:

So, you have to study for a lot of things and that means that sometimes you have to choose, you have to prioritise and so you might not do so well in both of them, which I think is really unfair. Not unfair, but it's not showing a true representation of what you can actually do compared to if you just had one thing at one time and could focus solely on that instead of splitting your time half and half or even like three quarters. (Eve, BFG1)

Students described other inconsistencies; for example, word limits changing at the last minute, or different teachers at the same school requiring different word limits for the same assessment. This student described how she had gone on a school trip to Rotorua and so was required to hand in her Biology internal early. At that time the teacher was very strict about not going over 2000 words, but when the trip students returned to school, they found that things had changed. Kahlia described this tension:

We get back and we're looking on Facebook and people are talking – 'Oh our teacher said you can go over 2,000, it's fine'. We were like 'We could have added so much into our internal!' (Kahlia, AFG1)

They felt that this was manifestly unfair. Others commented on the unfairness of credit entry requirements. For example, one student was not allowed to take English in Level 3, because she had been sick for an important internal in Year 12, and so did not have the number of Level 2 credits required to gain entry into Level 3 English. She felt this was patently unjust.

And when my Dean said, ‘You know what, you might not be able to take English next year, because you haven’t done that internal, and you’re missing two credits’. The fact that I can’t do a subject, because I don’t have one or two credits...If I didn’t pass anything, and I had 10 credits, I get it. Okay, fine. But like two credits – two or one credits, and I can’t take a subject; that is so restricting, and it’s so unfair. (Liza, AFG2)

The students talked about how sometimes they missed crucial last minute instructions about a standard because they were away on representative leave, or sick, in other words justifiably absent. They felt that the missed information often resulted in them receiving a lower grade than they could have achieved had they known the information.

### **Teachers**

Students in all schools talked about the inconsistencies, and therefore unfairness that existed between different teachers at their school. There were differences in the amount of help they were given, or conditions in which they sat assessments. Once again, they felt this very unjust, as explained here by three different students:

Talking with friends and stuff we’re always in class like ‘my teacher said this’ and ‘my teacher said that’ and it’s like how do we know which teacher to believe and what do we have to do? It’s just like there’s a lot of grey areas. (Taryn, AFG1)

I know last year with some of our English writing some of the classes got to do it at home and others had to do it in class. (Kate, CFG)

They got a heck of a lot more time because they got to take it home which took off a whole lot of stress for them. (Eliza, CFG)

### **Between schools**

There was also a strong sense from all the focus groups that students at other schools had a much easier road to achieve their credits than the girls did at these schools. They mainly spoke about state co-ed schools, but also mentioned private schools where they believed that each student got more one-on-one attention because their parents were paying for that level of help. They discussed different assessment conditions, different assessment criteria and different standards. Girls from different schools described it like this:

And [there are] inconsistencies across other schools as well, like other schools in [our city] are able to resubmit their internals more than once until they pass or until they lift their grades from a Merit to an Excellence, whereas other schools you do it and that's it. (Sarah, CFG)

We questioned our math teacher about that because she was like the HOD and she was just like 'we want to challenge you at our school, you know, we're a high performing school'. (Taryn, AFG1)

So each school has a different level of difficulty on how to get Excellence in your internals. I have a friend who goes to [a state co-ed school]. For Excellence we have to write three or four pages. For them to get Excellence in an internal they write a paragraph. It's literally like that. I showed her what I had to write and she was like 'why don't you go on the [NZQA] website, on the website it's only that much?' Their school follows that, but since we are a smart school ... [we have to do more] (Kahlia, AFG1).

Another student described a situation in a Chemistry class where the teacher had put up on the data screen an Excellence exemplar from the NZQA website. The teacher then said that she wouldn't even give that a Merit, even though it was an official NZQA Excellence exemplar. This made it very clear to the students that there was a national standard, and then there was another, higher standard for their school. They were also aware that when they moved on to university, the university didn't discriminate between schools, so even though they had to work much harder for their Excellence credits, in the end they were worth just the same as the students down the road who had achieved their credits more easily at a different school.

## **Systems**

Students in all schools felt that the systems in their school could be made much fairer if school leaders put some time and thought into things like the timing of assessments and the procedures to do with absence because of illness, extensions and resubmission opportunities. Only one of the three schools had an assessment calendar where all assessments for all subjects are published and available for all students and teachers to see. The absence of this simple system in two schools made the students' experience much more stressful, because they didn't know what was coming next, and teachers were not aware of clashes, or how much pressure particular students were under because of their combination of subjects. In School A, which did have a published assessment calendar, the girls said it wasn't that much help because teachers kept changing due

dates, and so although there were limited clashes at the beginning of the year, there certainly were by the time Term 2 came around. Jo described the effect on her of assessments scheduled for immediately before and after the Ball.

They decided to put all the internals the day before the Ball, so that we would be school-focused and not Ball-focused. But we're girls, of course we're going to be Ball-focused. I was on the committee so I had to get to [the Ball venue] at like 7.30 in the morning and the night before I probably went to bed at about one and then I had to be at school at seven and then I had to set up the whole Ball and then I had to come back to school to do some learning because they put it on a school day, it was so stupid. Then the whole afternoon I was getting ready and then when it actually got to the Ball I had had four or five hours sleep, been busy for 13 hours before it started and I hated it. I hated it so much. (Jo, AFG1)

### Strategies used to cope

I was interested to find out what strategies the students used to cope with what felt like to them was an unmanageable workload. So I asked them what they tended to do to cope when they felt overwhelmed. The data from this question are summarised in Table 4-7 below.

*Table 4-7: Theme 6: Strategies used to cope*

Subthemes	AFG1	AFG2	BFG1	BFG2	CFG1
Limiting social life	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Trying to prioritise	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Dropping or adding extra-curricular activities	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Unhealthy lifestyle decisions	√√	√√	√√	√√	√
Being self-aware	√√	√√	√√	√√	√

Their strategies fell into sub-categories of their social lives, deliberately prioritising, dropping or keeping extra-curricular activities, and making unhealthy lifestyle decisions. Finally, there was some evidence of self-awareness and an acknowledgment of the need for balance in their lives.

### Social life

Some students acknowledged that socialising helped with the stress of school, but many described cutting down on time spent with friends and family in order to cope with the demands of school. There was an agreement that many students ended up isolating themselves, sometimes unwittingly, in the quest to stay on top of the demands of school. Vanessa described becoming more isolated:

And then you start to cut your social life down and that's where also you start getting alone quite a bit. (Vanessa, BFG2)

### **Prioritising**

Participants in the focus groups unanimously talked about how they strategised and prioritised by choosing internal assessments over homework or studying for tests with no credits attached. Some chose not to hand in all internals. Every focus group described how it was common for girls to be working on another subject in the class that they were currently sitting in, in order to get things done on time, although this created a vicious cycle of missing content by not attending to the lesson. Skipping school on the day before an internal was due was common, as was choosing to complete internals with more credits over internals with fewer credits. A few canny students had decided to strategise with their external exams, and had already decided not to sit all the standards they were entered into. This was mostly because they already had many more credits than they needed, and by dropping standards they had more time in exams to focus on the few that they had decided to do. Ana and Cassandra described it this way:

You're like I need to sleep, I'm not gonna do this or I'll do it tomorrow or I'll do it during another class, that's sometimes what I do. I won't have time to do a little essay so I'll work on that in my other classes. That's actually what I've been doing a lot this year. You see a lot of other people doing that in classes this year. There will be something going on in a class but on their laptop, they're typing away another essay because it's just too much. (Ana, BFG2)

Because it just keeps building up to a point where it's like you're not sleeping, you're doing other things in class and then you're not listening to the teacher, what she's telling you now, and then you're trying to catch that up in another class. So you're always lagging behind everyone and that's really stressful. (Cassandra, BFG2)

### **Extra-curricular activities**

Half the participants described dropping extra-curricular activities that they enjoyed because of time constraints, but some determinedly continued with their out-of-school

activities as they were cognizant that these activities gave them some balance and helped take their minds off the stress and demands of school. Kahlia said that:

I had to drop all my extra-curriculars this year so I'd have time to study. (Kahlia, AFG1)

### **Unhealthy decisions**

Seven students described how they felt forced to compromise important aspects of their lives in order to stay on top of their school workload. A number talked about how family time was negatively impacted. Others admitted that they no longer went to church with their families. In general, all students mentioned things like crying, making bad food choices, and over or under-sleeping in order to stay afloat. More concerning was the admission that many of their peers coped by going out and drinking and engaging in other high-risk activities. Taryn and Catrina described this:

Some people just stop handing in internals and they lose the credits just because they crack under the pressure. (Taryn, AFG1)

I'm not involved in my siblings' or my parents' lives. It's like I don't want that to happen, but it just has to happen. (Catrina, AFG2)

### **Self-awareness**

Finally, a positive category. A number of girls had a good sense of self and managed to achieve a semblance of balance in their lives. They were aware of the idea of wellbeing, and how it was important for their mental, physical, social and physical health. There appeared to be a wide experience of parents encouraging their daughters to achieve balance, by taking mental health days off, for example. Nicola was one student who appeared to have a balance of sorts in her life:

My strategy is to do all my schoolwork during the week, Monday through Friday; come home from school and just try and pump it out and then have the weekend as complete relaxation time. No school work, don't even think about it. (Nicola, BFG1)

### **Suggestions for school leaders**

In response to my question about what school leaders could do to help make their school experience less stressful, the students in all focus groups were full of positive suggestions. The data from this question are summarised below in Table 4-8.

Table 4-8: Theme 7: Suggestions for school leaders

Subthemes	AFG1	AFG2	BFG1	BFG2	CFG1
Concrete suggestions	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Big picture suggestions	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√
Requests for understanding	√√	√√	√√	√√	√√

### Concrete suggestions

In the two schools that didn't have a level-wide assessment planner, this was felt to be crucial. There was also a unanimous desire to not have to complete so many credits, as they were very aware that they were doing significantly more than they needed. In order to not feel constantly rushed, they requested fewer standards with more credits. Other reasonable and possibly easily achieved requests were to not have internals due immediately after the holidays, so that they got to actually have a break. They pleaded to not have all internals due at the same time, and also not to have internals due in the week of the Ball. Catrina and Ana verbalised what each of their focus groups were saying:

I think we should have less standards with more credits, because half the time, the only reason the teachers are rushing us is because they have another standard to move to. And so they are giving us an internal, and say[ing], "Okay, you've got your three or four lessons in class. Then you've got to go home and finish it." And then they start us on another internal while we are still going [on the first one]. So, if we have less (sic) standards to do and with more credits, then I think that would be so much more manageable. (Catrina, AFG2)

Stop giving me so many internals and making them all due at the same time. The co-ordination with Departments would be amazing, even if we could have a week in between. And make a better mock timetable. I'm already freaking out about mocks because I have five subjects and two subjects with double exams. (Ana, BFG2)

Participants in School C, the only school where the students were doing six Level 3 subjects, asked to be allowed to take only five subjects, like other schools. All three schools asked for some sort of a 'breather' day late in Term three, when the stress levels are very high, where they could hang out with their school friends, but not talk about school.

### Big picture suggestions

It was suggested that leaders in single-sex girls' schools need to acknowledge that they need to put *more* effort into alleviating stress than other schools. One suggestion was to have a senior leader in charge of wellbeing in the school, to be accountable and to make it a priority. One group came up with the idea of teaching stress management right from Year 9 up, possibly in Health classes (this school has Health as a compulsory subject right up until Year 12). Other groups asked to have more life-skills learning, and help with prioritising. Liza explained it like this:

I think it would be nice in high school to have more life-style learning, like, this is how you make a CV; this is how you get into Uni; this is how you apply for Uni; if you're not going to Uni, this is the direction you could take. For girls to know that they have options, and they have choices, not just 'crap, I can't go to Uni'. (Liza, AFG2)

Needing more support and connection, the participants in one focus group asked for fortnightly meetings with Deans. More emphasis on looking after student mental health and being more open to talking about mental health was a request at another school. The third school participants thought that stress should be addressed earlier in the year, because "they think we are stressed at the end of the year, but actually it gets quite thick throughout the year" (Eliza, CFG).

### **Requests for understanding**

The participants unanimously seemed to think that schools, teachers and leaders really didn't understand the pressure and stress they experienced. This student described being paralysed by stress.

It would be helpful if they understood that when I'm stressed sometimes I can't physically make myself work. (Nicola, BFG1)

Kate, in School C, echoed this when she said:

Teachers could be more understanding that their subject isn't necessarily the most important thing and that we don't necessarily need it for next year. (Kate, CFG)

Interestingly, all groups also said that they would like more opportunities like the one they were in right now, where they could speak up without being judged, without being thought of as weak for feeling stressed, and have their voices heard.

## **PART TWO**

I conducted four interviews over the course of the investigation, one girl from School A, (Jo) two girls from School B, (Nicola and Cassandra) and one girl from School C, (Anna). At the end of every focus group, every participant said that she would be interested in taking part in an interview. However, when it came time to conduct the interviews, many students declined, stating that they were now under too much stress and pressure and couldn't afford the time out for an interview. Consequently, the girls whom I did interview were the ones who were successfully managing their stress and workloads. In other words, they were the ones whom I understood from the focus groups were the most balanced and resilient. I have therefore decided to discuss what personal qualities these girls possessed that enabled them to have that balance and resilience. In addition, I will also discuss in more depth their experience of school and their suggestions for change in these types of schools.

### **Jo, school A**

#### **Personal qualities of resilience**

Jo is a high-achieving student at School A. She is in the academic mentoring programme, which indicates that she is in the top 3% academically. When I started the interview off by asking her about what it is like to be a high achiever in this school, her first response was to say that "I wouldn't give credit to the school for my high achieving". Instead, she attributed her success to her family, which had a history of success, and to her own motivation and drive. Jo appeared to be a mature young woman who was very much aware of the need for balance and wellbeing. She talked about the importance of her part time job in helping her keep balanced, and the fact that she walked half an hour to and from school every day gave her time to prepare and reflect on the day. Jo also attended church and put aside time deliberately to spend with friends. She felt that these things, rather than taking time away from her study, actually made her study time more focused and she felt more refreshed when she did sit down to study.

#### **Experience of school**

Jo talked about an experience in the focus group of deciding not to hand in a Biology internal, and so I asked her to talk more about that decision and its consequences. She

described how she has always wanted to do her best, and in fact had a “fear of not doing well”. She felt she had to get Excellence in everything and “I felt like I would be disgracing myself and my teacher if I didn’t”. She realized in Year 12 that she was mostly acting out of fear, and so decided to challenge herself to relax a bit and not put in 100% “but kind of put in 90% and see how that would work, just to kind of push myself out of that fear based decision-making because I knew I needed to get myself to freak out to shake me out of that natural habit”. She decided not to hand in the Biology internal partly as a result of that decision, but also because of personal circumstances at the time which ate into her time. She realized that she had to choose between spending time on ‘school stuff’ and spending time addressing relationship issues. She talked about ‘drawing the line’ when it came to school expectations:

I saw it as me putting my foot down and saying actually this is where I draw the line on when school puts too much pressure on me to interfere with decisions I make. I had a big problem with that pressure because sometimes it gets a bit much and you do make dumb decisions and change what you value because of the mounting pressure. You just want to get rid of [the pressure].

Jo had the support of her Mum, and was happy with her decision. The “worst part” for her was the “backlash” she received from her Dean, who is also her academic mentor. Jo felt completely unsupported by her Dean, who made it very clear that what Jo had done was unacceptable and disappointing. Even though Jo explained her reasons for not completing the internal to the Dean, she did not accept these reasons, and was very concerned that Jo not make a habit of this kind of decision. As described earlier, Jo said she just felt like “the money-maker” for the school because of her high achievement. She felt that there was no concern for her emotional welfare or her wellbeing. In addition, it was only a 3-credit internal, and therefore was not going to affect her overall achievement for the year. Jo felt that the negative reaction she received from the Dean far outweighed her action. After her interview with the Dean, Jo had to spend some time in the bathroom crying before she went back to class but as she described to me,

I didn't feel like I was just sad for myself because I felt strong in my opinion ... I felt like I was grieving for everyone else because I knew that I wouldn't be the only one to experience this. There's 2200 girls here and to be treated like that when I'd made such a calculated decision and not to be heard ... or understood ... there are so many girls who have probably made the same decision as me, and do they all come to the Deans and get treated like crap?

Jo admitted that the school did care about students, but her feeling was that the motivation of the teachers, Deans and senior leaders was primarily one of school image; how the girls looked in their uniforms and how the school looked compared to other schools when it came to academic and sporting success.

### **Suggestions for change**

Jo had some interesting ideas for positive change in schools. She suggested that along with ERO reports, schools should be monitored for wellbeing, like countries are monitored for 'quality of life'. She noted however that students tend to be loyal to their school, even when they are unhappy, and so there would need to be some system to ensure students felt safe telling the truth about the realities of their experiences.

She also suggested that departments in her school could work more closely together so that they didn't all put assessments on the same day or week. She referred to the system in Germany where the rule is that there can only be two assessments per week, and "so at the beginning of the year it's kind of a first come first served basis for the subjects, which I think is quite interesting and cool".

As had been mentioned in every focus group, Jo reiterated the desire to see internal assessments "accurately valued" so that the amount of time and effort students put into a three-credit internal, for example, was only half of that put in to a six-credit internal. This reflects the consistent commenting in the focus groups that assessments were not on an even playing field when it came to the number of credits each one was worth. Jo's idea to help fix this problem was that during the moderation process, external moderators could regulate how many hours went into each standard in addition to monitoring whether school departments had marked accurately. This is at the government level. At the school level, teachers could ask students about how many hours they spent doing an internal, and internally moderate their own expectations as a result of what they learned.

In regard to the sense of a lack of community and school culture at her school, Jo suggested that school leaders should invest in creating relationships among the new Year 9 students when they first arrive at school, so that they could carry those relationships and that sense of community through with them to their senior NCEA years when they needed the support of each other.

In order to help students attain balance and wellbeing, Jo suggested that school leaders do more than just talk about it, in things like assemblies and house meetings. She suggested that the school should acknowledge activities that students do outside of school that help them achieve balance and encourage that broadness of experience, even if it is not directly related to the school, or in other words, even if the school can't get any credit for it. She would like to see a change in the attitudes and motivations of school staff and said "I think they've kind of forgotten that actually looking after everyone will make this school look a lot better anyway".

Jo's final comments were "The school and NCEA are kind of married together and so I think a lot of it comes down to how the school uses it. It's not an inherently bad system".

## **Nicola, School B**

### **Personal qualities of resilience**

Nicola is a talented sportswoman and has a significant leadership role as a sports captain in her school. In addition to her many hours of sports training and playing, she also prioritises time with her boyfriend. She tries to do all her schoolwork from Monday to Friday, leaving Saturdays free for sport and Sundays free to spend with her boyfriend. She feels that her decision to go to Victoria University and study Law has given her focus and incentive to keep achieving to the best of her ability. Unlike Jo, Nicola credits a lot of her success to the support of her teachers and Dean. Although she sometimes feels overwhelmed by school work, she usually maintains good balance with the support of these people in her school.

### **Experience of school**

Nicola feels very supported at school, primarily from the Head of Sport, whom the Sports Committee students have meetings with every week, and who helps them keep

an even keel when they are stressed. Nicola felt supported by other teachers also. She described this experience as an example of how the school is supportive of its students:

I do Drama and we just finished our Drama production. We were working on it for ten weeks in class; it was a massive class production worth six credits, and we had this one tech rehearsal day, which was on the Sunday, which was the same Sunday as my Lacrosse Nationals weekend. So, I was very stressed about what I should choose, Lacrosse or Drama. It basically got organised through liaising with my Dean and my drama teacher and the Head of Drama and my Lacrosse coach all together in a meeting and they basically said that we realise how important both of these things are for you, both academically and because you've been playing Lacrosse for four years and it's your last Nationals and it's Nationals, we've worked all season for it. They helped me come to the decision that basically I couldn't miss the drama rehearsal because if you miss that you don't qualify for passing the internal standard because it's a big massive 7-hour day or something. So, basically, I had to go to Cambridge, play all day Saturday, play the semi-final and then I just didn't get to play the final on the Sunday so I came back Sunday morning for the drama rehearsal.

It was a big weekend but the school was really helpful. I would not have been able to make that decision on my own, even with my parents, because I would have thought that my parents were just purely pushing me for like ... you can't miss schoolwork. So, it was good to hear it from a lot of other people as well and they were really supportive. It was quite upsetting for me because Lacrosse was quite a big thing.

Nicola said that her friends who were prefects felt supported by the Deputy Principals who worked with them, and the school's system of keeping form classes and form teachers together for the five years of their time at High School created a sense of family and community. She said that although the school pushes academic, sporting, Arts and cultural success;

At the same time, I've heard some really lovely things, like in assembly a couple of weeks ago [the Principal] talked to us about how all girls are different and all girls achieve at different rates. Someone's Achieved might be to them just as proud as someone's Excellence and you shouldn't put Achieved as so far below Excellence and you shouldn't say I only got Achieved. That was really nice to hear from the Principal.

Nicola did still talk however, about feeling uncomfortable about getting Merits in History, as she had been a straight Excellence student in Year 12. She also talked about the pressure the whole year group felt when year group results were produced in

assembly each year. There was an intense desire not to let the school down with slipping results.

Like Jo, and all her peers in the focus groups, Nicola said that internals were not well spaced at her school, and that credit values were not equal or fair compared to the vastly differing amounts of time that were required for each standard.

### **Suggestions for change**

Nicola also had some very practical suggestions for change at the school level that could make students' lives more manageable. As evidenced in her experience with her Drama production clashing with the Lacrosse national championship described above, Nicola suggested that the school make more effort to coordinate the Sports, Arts and Culture calendars more effectively. The staff involved in this incident with her agreed that this could have been organised better.

She also suggested that the school place more value on physical exercise as a means of achieving balance and wellbeing. She suggested some more active 'play spaces' for the Year 9's, who are still at an age where they do want to play. She also thought that the school could encourage more physical activity at every level, during lunchtimes for example.

## **Anna, School C**

### **Personal qualities of resilience**

Anna is a quiet, shy student who is a high achiever and a runner. She told me that she always puts school first, due to a combination of being a conscientious student who wants to do consistently well, and as a way of avoiding social interaction. Anna was feeling now that she regrets putting school first all the time, because she thinks she has missed out on some things. She admits that the pressure she feels is mostly self-driven. Her parents are supportive and are aware that she gets stressed easily so step in when she is stressed and needs time out or a distraction. She talks to her good friend to alleviate stress and says this works well for her. Her running habit is another way that she achieves balance and wellbeing, although she admits giving that up at crunch times like in mock exam week or when several internal assessments are due. Anna also

acknowledges that she needs to broaden her sphere of activities as she heads off to university, as she believes she has been too narrow in her focus up until this point.

### **Experience of school**

Anna is acutely aware of the expectations that others have for her, especially her teachers. She has always done well, and so knows that it is expected that she continues to do so. Teachers always encourage her to do ‘optional’ standards because they know she is capable of it. Sometimes, however, she admits that she would rather not do the extra optional standards. Anna said that she did feel supported by the school, but then “at the same time, if I was stressed about school or something, I don’t talk about it with school. I don’t think I’ve ever seen our Dean really”. When I asked what she thought the motivation of the teachers and leaders in the school was, Anna said that it was “probably just for everyone to do as well as they can and get the grades they want to or know they can”.

Anna said that the girls all hyped each other up about assessments, and compared with each other about what they had written and how they had done. She found this a negative experience.

Yes and I think there’s a lot of comparison. Oh what have you done? Oh I’ve only done this. We have our Facebook page and someone goes ‘Oh did anyone do this?’ Then someone will be like ‘Oh I forgot that’, or ‘No I’ve got to do that’. So, it kind of ... even though it might not be something you have to have, [you think] ‘Oh no I haven’t done that, I’d better do that’.

At times Anna admitted that she didn’t enjoy school and sometimes “I don’t want to be here”. When I asked her when those times were, she said “probably when I realise how much I have to do or if stress takes over and I’m just like why am I doing this?”

### **Suggestions for change**

As in all the focus groups and interviews, Anna talked about how internal assessments were always “piled on top of each other” and she would really like that changed. She said that the students were asked about what they think about things and what they would like to happen:

But I don't think you always see things happening. They might say 'How are you feeling?' or 'Oh yeah, we're going to change that' or something, but then you don't see it put into action.

So, Anna would like that to change. She would like students to be listened to and then to actually see some action happening in response to the students' needs. In other words, like Nicola and Jo, she would like to see not just talk about wellbeing, but real action.

Finally, Anna was very aware that there were a number of students in Year 13 who were not coping as well as she was. She suggested that there be a place where students who were stressed could go to, to either talk to someone or focus on something else for a little while, where those students wouldn't feel judged or weak for not coping.

## **Cassandra, School B**

### **Personal qualities of resilience**

Cassandra has learnt the hard way about the need for balance and wellbeing. She is a high-achiever and a Community Group leader in the school. When she was in Year 11, she watched her older sister in Year 13 suffer terrible consequences of stress. Her sister had such bad anxiety and panic attacks that she was off school for a month on doctor's orders. Last year, when Cassandra was in Year 12, she started going down the same track, with breathing problems and panic attacks. Her doctor recommended that she not sit the mock exams that were coming up and so she did not. As a consequence of all this, Cassandra has learned that that kind of stress and pressure is unhealthy:

Obviously, the marks [in NCEA] are important, but I think it's not as important if you're not okay yourself and that's kind of something that I realised.

However, it remains a difficult conflict for her to come to terms with, as she is intrinsically motivated to be conscientious and high-achieving. It has been difficult for her to step back from always getting Excellence credits for every assessment:

With having more responsibility with being Community Leader I think it gave me that realisation that it's not necessarily healthy, and then me having these opportunities and realising that I can have balance and that I should have balance, because it makes me happier. I think even last year I was kind of almost scared of balance so it's like a different kind of stress. This year I actually have gone a bit better with those panic attacks and that kind of thing. I still feel anxious, but I think definitely compared to last year it's been a lot better with the frequency of having panic attacks and that kind of thing has gone down, which is a good thing because I realise that it's not healthy but because of that I do think that some of my achievement has gone a bit downhill.

Cassandra has gained a mature response to the intrinsic drive to get all Excellence credits and now listens to the "voice in my head [that] just keeps reassuring myself". She is aware that sometimes her "own mind and own thoughts is (sic) sometimes your worst enemy". The other attribute helping Cassandra with her sense of self and success is her extended family who have all role-modelled success for her in different ways. And, of course, the crisis with her sister was a clear warning of the dangers of putting yourself under too much stress and pressure.

### **Experience of school**

Cassandra is very sensitive to the culture of success at her school, which feeds her own intrinsic desire to do well, but also creates the danger of pushing her over the edge with her mental health. The overwhelming workload, combined with personal and teacher expectations can combine with devastating consequences, as she witnessed in her sister. She is very aware that she too could face those same devastating consequences if she is not careful. Cassandra talks fondly of her teachers and counsellors, and describes many instances when they have shown care and concern for her. She also credits her teachers with seeing possibilities within her and encouraging her into activities that she might not have otherwise undertaken.

However, there have also been negative experiences for Cassandra at school. She describes one instance when she accepted that she just couldn't put in her best effort for a Statistics internal. She was overwhelmed with other internals and decided to give herself a bit of a break with this one in order to stay mentally well. When she received an Achieved grade for the internal assessment, she didn't like the feeling but was trying to reassure herself that it didn't matter in the long run. Unfortunately, her teacher said

that those who got Achieved didn't work hard enough and that there were 'many' 'Excellences' in the class. In her stress and disappointment, Cassandra was crying in a back corner and no-one noticed her distress.

I think that was probably one of the worst experiences but looking back I knew that for me that's what I needed to do, so I kind of accepted it, but it definitely has been hard.

### **Suggestions for change**

Once again, Cassandra suggested that the students not be burdened with so many more credits than they need each year. She asked for the number of credits sat to be reduced. She felt this would help everybody.

I think maybe if they gave you less [standards to do] then you'd have a bit longer to grasp the concepts, you'd have less stress so you wouldn't get so burnt out and then not want to try as much. I think that's definitely an effect of stress that I have; sometimes I'm either just in overdrive or sometimes [my] body's just 'nope'.

She wondered, however, whether teachers and leaders already knew about the stress the girls were under, and if they did, she questioned why they hadn't done something about it already. She suspected that they all, students and teachers, were on a hamster wheel, just going around and around with no-one able to step off to change anything. Although she felt like students at her school did have a decent amount of 'voice', she also thought that students didn't want to criticise because they didn't want to be seen as disrespectful of the teachers or leaders. Like many other girls interviewed for this research, Cassandra expressed a desire to have more opportunities like the one I was providing with this research, where they could speak openly and have their voices heard without fear of retribution.

I think it would make me feel like my opinions were kind of valued and that our stories were valued because I think even by talking to everyone in the focus group, as much as everyone seems to have that common thing that yes, it's hard and there's things that we would maybe want to change, I think it would not only be a good opportunity to voice our opinion because obviously, a lot of people do want change. But then also I think it would just be cool for people to be able to talk about their stories that maybe teachers and staff and even me, I don't know necessarily some of the things about my peers. I think it would be really good to open that door to communication that could possibly lead to some change. Yes, I think it would definitely be useful because then we wouldn't have to worry about how to approach it anyway because sometimes approaching those conversations can be

kind of scary. Sometimes you don't know if you're your voice alone, like would I need to start a petition or something? You don't really know.

Another request she made for change was for the leaders of the school to be more open to addressing the personal costs of NCEA and for them to stop ignoring the stress effects that the students were experiencing.

I think also it would be good if the school kind of opened up to a bit more of the personal side of NCEA and the stress to support you through that. I know it's kind of hard and it can be taboo and that kind of thing but I think definitely as hard as it is with work I think it does lead to... as we talked about for a lot of people, the effect of it also does have a mental and physical kind of effect on you.

She wished for a system where help could be provided for stressed students without those students having to reach out for it. As with the focus group in School C, Cassandra recognised that to be seen going to the Counsellor was seen as a weakness. As a leader of the Community Group in the school, Cassandra attempted to make some impact on students' stress during their community week which she ran in the school. She organised "yoga for de-stressing, and we gave out cookies for people to decorate and that kind of thing". She would like these sorts of things to happen more often in school, and not be left to students to organise.

A concrete suggestion she had was for the school to set up a managed e-mail account where students could make requests or suggestions or even just ask for help. She felt this would help the leaders understand the needs of the students better, and would be a good avenue for the girls to have a sense of voice in the school. At a government level, Cassandra asked that NCEA be refined so that it is less stressful:

I think over time it would be cool if they could kind of tweak it and make it better and easier and still having that value of setting you up well for Uni. I think they set you up quite well to do well, but then also just refining it to make it less stressful and maybe an even better system.

## **Summary**

The girls interviewed for this research represented a range of ethnicities, personalities and abilities; however, they all 'sang from the same song sheet'. NCEA is being over-assessed in their schools, they are experiencing significant and constant stress, and seem to be 'surviving' high school rather than thriving in it. The strategies they are using to

cope with what they feel is an unmanageable workload include some proactive and healthy behaviours, but predominantly unhealthy behaviours, leading with sacrificing sleep, not eating healthily and giving up other activities that they have previously enjoyed. In other words, these findings indicate that there is an urgent need to address the wellbeing needs of our students in these schools. The participants of this study suggest that significant adjustments are needed; to the way NCEA is run in these schools and to what is expected from these students. These main findings are further discussed in the next chapter, Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the findings presented in Chapter Four in relation to the body of literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The discussion will be framed by the research aims: To investigate the wellbeing of girls in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools in New Zealand; and To examine the relationship between the national qualification system of NCEA and students wellbeing.

Overall, my study suggests that girls in high-decile high performing single-sex schools are suffering under an almost constant pressure to succeed. This is worsened by over-assessment and a lack of coordination between departments and between areas of the school. I found that this is mostly a ‘silent suffering’. The girls are afraid to bring workload or stress issues to the attention of school leaders for fear of being seen as ‘weak’ or not able to cope. There is some talk starting to happen in these schools about wellbeing, but it is not being reflected in the girls’ experiences of the systems in the schools, or, in some cases, in the way the girls perceive that they are treated by school teachers and leaders. Expectations from parents, teachers, the school and themselves played a huge role in their stress. The consequences of all this constant pressure led to the students sometimes utilising productive coping strategies but, mostly, they use unproductive strategies in terms of their wellbeing. Students have experiences that no one is talking about. They want their voices heard. They want their experiences acknowledged. Finally, my findings suggest that it is crucial for schools, particularly high-decile, high performing single-sex schools, to address the wellbeing of their students urgently, and this involves more than just having counsellors available and having a suicide prevention plan in place. This involves stepping back from the machine that is a school, and really seeing the experiences and the realities of these young people.

### **NCEA and overassessment**

Students at all three schools liked aspects of NCEA. They liked that they could spread the assessments out over the year, and didn’t have to rely on only one high-stakes exam at the end of the year. They thought it was a rigorous system that prepared them well for university. However, the consistent message from the participants was that NCEA, as it

was implemented in their school, was overwhelming and was a significant contributor to their levels of stress, anxiety and poor wellbeing. They clearly and consistently talked about having to sit far too many assessments, and about collecting far more credits than they needed. In addition to that, the biggest concern was that often assessments clashed, so they had two or more due on one day or over a short period of time, such as a week. This put many of them into positions they didn't feel comfortable with, where they had to choose where to spend their time, and where not to. They felt that they could often only give 50% of their effort to an assessment, instead of the 100% that they wanted to give. This reality has been described in the government literature. In the last couple of years, the New Zealand government, through its agencies ERO and NZCER, has looked into the issues associated with NCEA. What they have found is that too many schools are over-assessing, and are not taking into account the reality experienced by their students when they chose dates for assessments, which adds to the relentless pressure on these young people (Education Review Office, 2015; Hipkins et al., 2016; Scoop Media, 2015). Principals have started to recognise this problem, and a few have made changes to their systems and assessment programmes, but not nearly enough (Sziranyi, 2015). My findings certainly reinforce this. Although two of the schools I collected data from have started to talk about wellbeing, according to the participants, it would seem that no school has made any real changes to the way they manage assessments, with concerning consequences for the wellbeing of their students.

Students in all schools described how NCEA took away from them the benefits of holistic learning, and they felt that they were just trying to get through a series of tasks, which all 'piled up'. This pressure took away any enjoyment in their learning. As they described it, they are working to 'pass', not working to learn, which contrasts with what most schools espouse in their mission statements. It seems that Locker and Cropley (2004) research is also applicable in the New Zealand context. They described studies that showed that even eight weeks before a high-stakes assessment, students were equally as anxious as they were just the week before the assessment. With no breathing space between assessments, my research data indicate that the research participants are permanently in a state of stress and anxiety. This finding may well apply to other similar secondary schools. The idea of 'school burnout' is also described in Wang et al.'s (2015) research in Finland, where these researchers found that although the students' PISA rankings were high, they were emotionally disengaged from school. I

would certainly describe most of the participants I interviewed for this research as burned out and disengaged to various extents from school. The sense I got from them was that they were just ‘surviving’ high school, even though most of them were ‘Excellence’ students.

My research findings related to assessment driving the curriculum and the considerable workload for students in high decile schools is reflected in the NZCER’s ‘Survey of Secondary Schools’ carried out in 2015 (Wylie & Bonne, 2016) which found that these issues were more prevalent in high-decile (decile 9 or 10) schools than in lower decile schools. The students I spoke to all perceived that they worked harder for their credits, and sat more internal assessments than their peers in lower decile schools. NCEA and the over-assessment of these young women was a large cog in the machine of school for them. The way this was managed in their schools was certainly one of the biggest causes of their stress. And like a cogged machine, they felt powerless to change anything about this reality. Some of them chose not to sit some assessments, but this often had negative consequences for them.

Findings in my study that do not seem to have been addressed in any of the New Zealand government research, or any research overseas, include the sense the students had of their assessment system, NCEA, being unjust and inequitable. Students in all schools believed that it was harder to achieve a standard in their high-decile, high performing school, than it was in other schools that they had friends in. They were very aware, for example, that different assessment conditions and standards existed in different schools. One example was of a Math assessment, where students in another school were allowed to bring in a ‘cheat sheet’ but they were not. There was also the example of a Chemistry teacher who showed the students an ‘Excellence’ exemplar provided by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and said that she wouldn’t even have given it a Merit. The girls in my study also described many other inequities, such as different or changing word limits, little ‘hooks’ that tripped them up but didn’t actually contribute to their understanding, or lack of it, and different levels of help and support from different teachers. They described these things as occurring between different schools, but also within their own school. This finding has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in any other literature and these beliefs held by the participants suggest that further research needs to be done about these perceptions of unfairness and inequities.

## **Systems, silos and a lack of coordination**

The second cog in the machine that puts undue pressure on the students in my study was the negative impact produced by the way that schools administered NCEA. This is partly related to requiring the girls to sit too many assessments, as described above, but it also applies to the more nitty-gritty aspects of administering the assessment system. The most often mentioned complaint was that different subjects had assessments due on the same day, or in the same week. One student described having five important internal assessments all due in the last week of term, and this was only one week after 'mock' exams had finished. Mock exams are important, as they are often used in schools to calculate prizewinners for prize giving, and they are also used for derived grades in the case of injury, bereavement or illness during the actual external exams. As evidenced in the recent earthquake disruption in Kaikoura and Wellington, these practice exam grades can be crucial to students' records of achievement. Their reliability as accurate measures of a student's understanding or knowledge is compromised when that student has had the added stress and pressure of other internal assessments close to the practice exams. As teachers, we would not accept the expectation to complete reports and appraisal documentation in the same week, and yet we are asking our students to achieve similar workloads week after week.

This finding is supported by Kouzma and Kennedy (2002), who suggested that a possibility of over-work in high school students is that senior high school students are just expected to cope with large amounts of homework. One student in another study echoed what I found in my study when she said "For some reason all teachers love to assign huge amounts of homework on the same nights, which keeps me awake 'til all hours trying to find the best possible answers because there is a lot of pressure put on us kids to do so well" (Conner et al., 2010, p. 54). Stephanie Greaney, ERO's Evaluation Services Manager, stated in a media release about the ERO report on the wellbeing of secondary school students that "some teachers are deciding on assessments without knowing what other assessments the student had on for that week" (Scoop Media, 2015). This was made worse in two of the schools in which I collected data, in that there were no school-wide assessment planners where teachers and students would be able to see where and when the clashes were, and adjust accordingly. In the one school that did have an assessment calendar, the girls said that it didn't work, because as the year went on, teachers changed assessment dates without consulting the calendar, and so they still

ended up with multiple clashes and consequently unsustainable levels of stress. This finding is in line with research by the ERO, who found in 2015 that “very few schools were responding to this [assessment] overload by reviewing and changing their curriculum and assessment practices” (Education Review Office, 2015, p. 29).

The findings in my study differed to some extent from what has been discovered by the ERO and overseas research however. The girls also talked about practices that were seemingly meant to ‘control’ students around important events like the Ball, by placing assessments immediately before or after these extra-curricular aspects of a student’s high school life. Although this practice probably did ensure the girls were working hard at school right until the last minute before the Ball, it also meant that the girls enjoyment of the Ball was compromised. Students also felt it was unfair that they had internal assessments due immediately before and immediately after mock exams.

In addition, there did not seem to be any system in any of the schools that monitored students’ over-involvement in extra-curricular activities, or even their general levels of stress. Some students were in contact with guidance counsellors, but many were not, and were battling on alone. There was definitely a sense from all three schools that no-one really understood the students’ reality. This view is also supported by the research of Mansfield (2014) who highlights the gaps between what teachers and school leaders believe and what the students’ actual lived experience is. Both Mansfield (2014) and Duckett et al. (2008) comment on the fact that students’ voices have been neglected in the research into student wellbeing so far. Mansfield (2014) states that including student voice is imperative for inclusive research and practice: “The student voice literature argues that including and honoring students’ perspectives yields richer, more authentic research results as well as a more democratic learning space that fosters positive student outcomes” (p. 393).

## **Expectations**

All students in all schools talked about how expectations affected their levels of stress. There was not a single source of expectation; rather a combination of sources existed - from parents, the school, each other and themselves. The higher achieving students acknowledged that their expectations of themselves were often a negative force in their levels of stress, but this was reinforced by school expectations and those of friends and family. At Schools A and B, successful students were constantly paraded in front of

other students, and publicised in newsletters and on advertising boards. Even very successful students, who were consistently achieving Excellence endorsements, felt the expectations to do more and to get more Excellence credits, because the celebrated students had more Excellence credits, and they wondered whether they could have worked harder and achieved more also. However, they also realised that the schools' and teachers' high expectations of them had helped to make them as successful as they were. The literature supports this positive association between teacher expectation and student success (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). What the research has not touched on to date however, is how this expectation, while enhancing student achievement, also creates a sense of never quite being good enough. The students just didn't seem to feel a positive glow from their achievement.

The Rubie-Davis et al (2010) study also exposed the reality of some students feeling "overburdened by parents' unrealistically high expectations" (p. 49.). This was reinforced in my research, with the Asian students in particular expressing immense pressure from their parents to consistently achieve at the highest level. I also found that in many instances, the students put the pressure on themselves with their own expectations, and it wasn't always the parents' expectations that exerted the most pressure. This also mirrors the findings of Rubie-Davis et al (2010). Robertson (2013) suggests that the influence of peers and, in particular, high achieving students comparing themselves with others in their class or school, is a topic that warrants investigation. In my study, the students talked about the pressure created by the expectation of their peers, and how comparisons with each other were constant and stressful.

The fear of negative consequences of academic 'failure' was evident in my research, particularly in the higher achieving students. Lowe and Lee (2008) called this the fear of 'social derogation' which is when students fear the possibility that other key people - teachers, Deans and parents, will devalue her for less than perfect test results. For a number of students in my study this was not just a fear, but a reality. One high achieving student was severely chastised for choosing not to submit an internal assessment, and others had comments written on their reports suggesting that they needed to develop resilience, as they had also chosen not to complete an assessment because of overloading.

The students in my study did not equate the pressure and expectation to succeed as leading to positive wellbeing. In fact, the data suggested the opposite. A number of students were experiencing or had experienced mental ‘unwellness’ because of the stress and pressure of school despite, and perhaps because of, being high achievers. This finding is also reflected in the literature. For example, Duckett et al. (2008) also found that students perceive the pressure to succeed academically “as leading to negative wellbeing”(p. 96). Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that expectations play a large part in the pressure on a student in the centre of the machine of senior high-schooling and NCEA.

In thinking about and analysing my findings, I have developed a model of a set of cogs or gears, all connected to each other. The student is the middle cog, affected by all the cogs around it. The cogs around the student are the things that put pressure on the student, and make it impossible for the student to slow down, or change direction, or step off the machine altogether. These cogs around the student are those things mentioned above, namely, expectations, systems, (including a lack of coordination between different parts of the school and departments working as silos), and over assessment of NCEA. This model is shown in Figure 5-1 overleaf.

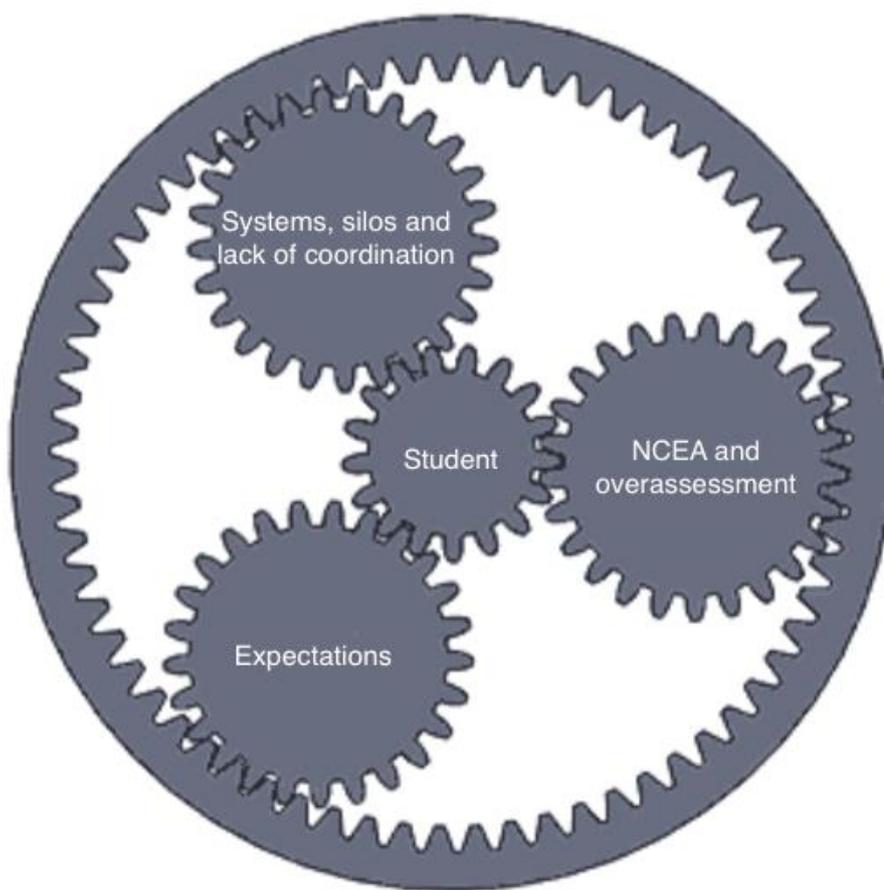


Figure 5-1: The 'machine' of student experience at school

These three broad pressures of expectations, NCEA and overassessment, and the systems and lack of coordination within schools, create an experience of school for students that is far from ideal.

### **Consequences for students**

The consequences for students of this pressure forced on them are serious. They described being constantly stressed, which resulted in generally negative feelings associated with their time at school, using words like 'dread', 'worry', 'overwhelmed' and 'frustrated'. There was much use of the word 'anxiety' in all its forms, and some described feeling 'heartbroken' after putting in immense effort, only to be cut back a grade for missing a small thing. The idea that a Merit grade was in fact a 'fail' grade came through in every focus group, and they described how disappointed they felt in themselves if they got a Merit instead of an Excellence. They felt a constant fear of

failure, and used similes to describe the feeling of powerlessness and fear: ‘a monkey in a pack of lions’, ‘like the monster Hydra’, ‘as if an avalanche is about to fall on me’.

These descriptions of stress in high school students are to be found elsewhere in the literature. Kouzma and Kennedy (2004) studied stress among adolescents, and suggested that “10-15% of adolescents experience chronic or debilitating stress” (p.314). The literature also reinforces that homework, expectations, high-stakes assessment and University pressure are all triggers for stress; (Conner et al., 2014; Kouzma & Kennedy, 2004; Robinson et al., 2009), the same triggers as I found in this study. In Conner, Pope and Galloway’s (2010) study, the majority of students in the top level United States schools that they surveyed felt academic stress constantly. Results showed that “more than 70 percent of students reported that they often or always feel stressed by their schoolwork, and 56 percent reported often or always worrying about such things as grades, tests, and college acceptance” (p. 54). This finding was certainly reflected in the responses from the students in this study.

The constant comments about stress and anxiety that I found in this study mirror the research into the higher levels of affective stress experienced by girls, particularly in high achieving single-sex schools. Many studies have found that females exhibit more worry, stress and anxiety when it comes to assessment than males (Cole et al., 1999; Hodge et al., 1997; Onwuegbuzie, 1995; Sharma & Sud, 1990). Locker and Cropley (2004) found that it was particularly the girls in independent or grammar schools in England who reported a greater negative mood overall before assessments and, in particular, the girls only schools had the highest negative results for mood and distress. Furthermore, both the all girls’ schools in their study were well-established, and had a consistently high record of success at GCSE, ‘A’ Levels and progression to university. Although my study does not compare different kinds of schools, and all are high-achieving and single-sex, my results also show concerning high instances of girls describing negative mood and distress throughout the year, not just before end-of-year exams. Like Wang et al.’s (2015) findings that high achieving students were at the greatest risk for experiencing adverse levels of stress and depression, and Korea’s PISA assessments showing high achievement but low happiness, my findings also show that high achievement is no panacea for mental health risk. The girls in my study were predominantly ‘Excellence’ students, however they suffered from constant stress and anxiety, with 4 out of the 22 admitting to having been treated for a mental health issue.

The literature supports this finding. In Conner et al.'s (2010) study student responses also clearly showed that they were “experiencing distress. Their grades may indicate that they are meeting or exceeding academic standards, but their words indicate that they are sacrificing their health and wellbeing” (p. 56).

### **Coping strategies**

In addition to the more serious reports of diagnosed mental illness, the students in this study reported high levels of other negative physical and mental health consequences that they used as a mode of coping with the work overload and the constant pressure. Most students talked about sacrificing sleep, and this was in fact the most common coping strategy with negative consequences for wellbeing. ‘Pulling all-nighters’ was common, which resulted in students falling asleep during their classes, or missing days of school. This is reflected in the existing literature, such as that of Kouzma and Kennedy (2002), who found that it is not uncommon for students to often study into and through the night. These researchers said that it was not yet clear whether this was a result of time-management issues, a lack of clarity over the task, or “a fact of senior high-schooling where students are expected to cope with large amounts of homework” (p. 196). The students in my study have indicated through their responses that it is indeed this last reason that is the valid one for them. Pope (2001) conducted a longitudinal study of a group of students who were “the pride of the education system and the hope for the future” (p. 3). She found a significantly different reality however, as students were sacrificing sleep and living in an almost constant state of stress, anxiety and frustration. Also in line with other research is the evidence in this study that students are forgoing extra-curricular activities that they have previously enjoyed as a way of gaining time to put into school-work. In Conner et al.'s (2010) study, it was found that 60.3% of students at top-performing schools “reported having to drop an activity they enjoy because of school-work and other demands” (p. 55).

Another aspect of my study was the choice to focus on schools in high socio-economic areas. My findings that indicate a high level of anxiety and achievement pressure and a high rate of diagnosed depressive and anxiety symptoms, are indicative of findings by Luthar et al. (2013) which demonstrated that upper middle class students were “more likely to be more troubled” and had “higher rates, compared to norms, of serious depressive, anxiety and somatic symptoms” (p. 1529).

### **Suffering under a constant pressure to succeed**

There appears to be an extra layer of pressure for those girls in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools, and in this study, I identify it as the constant pressure to succeed. This means, more often than not for these girls, getting ‘Excellence’ grades. The students in this study were very aware of their schools’ focus on achievement, and particularly in one school, the school’s drive to be seen as a top-performing school. This had consequences for the girls’ experiences of school and exposure to pressure. The literature around performativity supports this finding. Ball (2003) describes performativity as a culture in which judgments are made using comparisons of performances of individuals and organisations that serve as measures of quality. In the case of schools, especially the types of schools involved in this study, this is reflected in what appears to be an obsession with results. This ‘performativity’ trickles down to the students – in fact, they are perhaps as much, if not more, the victims of a performative culture as teachers and school leaders are.

In addition, the high achieving girls in my study also described situations of ‘overscheduling’, where they were involved in so many extra-curricular groups and teams that they often didn’t have time to eat lunch. Their schools made these very aware that this involvement would enhance their chances of securing scholarships to universities. The literature reflects this finding and identifies it as a consequence of achievement pressure, where students feel pressure to not only uphold top grades, but also to be involved in as many extra-curricular activities as possible, in order to enhance their appeal and chances of scholarships to prestigious universities (Luthar et al., 2013; Robertson, 2013; Yates et al., 2008). Other studies have also found that this pressure, in addition to the academic pressure, can exacerbate stress, lead to burnout (Robertson, 2013) and result in students “sacrificing normal student social life” (Nordmo & Samara, 2009, p. 255). I found in my study that this was true for many students. They talked of social isolation, and of feeling guilty - or thinking twice any time there was an opportunity for a social event.

The sense of unmanageability that was repeated in all the focus groups and interviews that were undertaken for this study is mirrored in the research into achievement pressure

on students from high socio-economic communities. Both Pope (2001) and Levine (2008) have described the severe consequences experienced by students because of the unremitting academic pressure, such as depression, anxiety and even in some cases, suicide. More commonly, they reported “a debilitating sense of not being able to keep up” (Levine, 2008, p. 30).

My findings, reinforced by international literature into this issue, suggest a worrying reality for many of our students in high-decile, high performing girls’ schools. The passion and enthusiasm with which all the participants entered into discussion of their experience of high school and NCEA included a plea for their voices to be heard, for things to change. I would describe it as a plea for help, except that the mood was more one of resignation and a lack of hope than of thinking that anything could change. Although it is too late to change things for the participants of this study - who will finish school in a matter of weeks, it is imperative that we listen to their voices, and make changes accordingly for the next cohort of students coming through.

### **Urgent need to address wellbeing needs**

What the students in this study are telling us is that there is an urgent need to address the wellbeing needs of girls attending a school like those from which my participants came. They see the irony daily of, for example, being told to take care of their wellbeing, but then being given three internal assessments to do on that same day. My findings show that the girls desperately want more than talk about wellbeing - they want action. They are aware of the serious consequences the stress and pressure they experience daily is having on their physical and mental health, but they feel powerless to change anything because of the three huge ‘cogs’ - of expectations, NCEA and over-assessment, and unhelpful school systems. Only schools can make these changes. The ERO (Education Review Office, 2015) has called for change but, in my opinion, not very loudly. Other research has also recommended that particular attention be paid to reducing overall anxiety and negative emotions, particularly in “all female schools and those with particularly high standards and expectations for students” (Locker & Cropley, 2004, p. 342). There have been consistent calls in other research not to overlook these young people in high performing schools in high socio-economic communities (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Pope, 2001; Rainey, 2013; Yates et al., 2008). Robertson (2013) said “it remains important to investigate sources of negative affect

such as worry in advanced learners- for girls in particular- and to address these concerns with teachers, students and parents” (p. 478). The Principal of a top performing school in the United States reinforced this when he said “ the great challenge ... in schools where excellence is a value is to simultaneously have balance as a value” (Rainey, 2013). It is crucial for the leaders of schools to step back and open their eyes to the realities being experienced by the girls in these schools. They feel like a cog, trapped by other bigger cogs, with nowhere to go and no power to do anything about their situation except to survive it.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

### Introduction

This study explored the wellbeing of Year 13 girls in high-decile, high performing, single-sex schools in New Zealand; more specifically, the ways that the demands of NCEA, the national academic qualification, affected their wellbeing. It considered the perceptions and experiences of students in three of these schools in two different cities in New Zealand and has provided a valuable insight into these perceptions and experiences. It has also helped break the silence in the literature about this particular subset of students in New Zealand.

This final chapter will provide an overview of the research study, draw overall conclusions, discuss any limitations, and make recommendations for further research. Five key conclusions are presented which are related to the three research questions that have guided this study. Although these conclusions emerge from the three schools in this study, it is very possible that these findings may be transferable to other similar schools. In addition, these conclusions are so consistent across the three schools involved in this study as well as across all of the participants, that it is very likely that similar data would be gathered from other similar schools. It may also be surmised, therefore, that these conclusions could be transferable to those other similar schools.

### Key conclusions

#### Key conclusion 1:

**Girls in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools report many wellbeing issues as a result of the perceived almost constant pressure to succeed.**

It is apparent from the rich data collected over five focus groups and four individual interviews that the participants in these high-decile, high performing single-sex schools perceive themselves to be almost permanently in a state of stress and anxiety. These students reported having frequent general negative feelings like dread and worry, and experienced negative consequences for both their mental and physical health. In addition, their social lives were minimal, and they were operating under a constant sense of unmanageability in regard to their school workload. This pressure to succeed

appears to come predominantly from school cultures which seem to value academic success above all other values.

These experiences are mirrored in the literature in which 21st century school students have been labelled “generation stress” (Sontag, 2002). Students in schools around the world have reported feeling academic stress constantly (Conner et al., 2010) and this has been shown to be worse for girls (Locker & Cropley, 2004; Sharma & Sud, 1990), and worse again for those girls in privileged communities who have “higher rates, compared to norms, of serious depressive, anxiety and somatic symptoms” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1529). Overseas research also supports the reality of students suffering physically and mentally from too much homework and schoolwork (Cheung & Leung Ngai, 1992). The literature also suggests that our western values where “wealth and status [are] touted as the ultimate life goals” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 1545) can “threaten the wellbeing of individuals and communities” (p. 1529).

The overassessment of NCEA is adding to the pressure these young women face, as are expectations and the unhelpful systems within schools that appear to add to, rather than alleviate, student stress and anxiety. These factors are reflected in my next key conclusions.

### **Key conclusion 2:**

**NCEA is perceived to be inequitable and over-assessed by these students at these schools.**

The students in this study were unanimous in their perceptions that not only was NCEA administered and assessed differently in different schools, it was over-assessed at their school. They believed they were completing many more standards than they needed to pass each Level of NCEA, and this increased workload added to their stress. They believed that lack of systemic control of assessments at their school led to them sitting multiple assessments at a time unnecessarily. They described NCEA as an often unfair system, where little ‘hooks’ could trip them up and prevent them from getting the grades they believed their understanding deserved.

These perceptions are also evidenced in the New Zealand government literature around assessment. In ERO’s *Wellbeing for success* document (Holsted, 2016), published last

year, conclusions included that “students in all schools were experiencing a very assessment driven curriculum and assessment anxiety” and also hinted at the lack of balance in schools by suggesting that “achieving academic success is a part of wellbeing but it is not the only factor” (p. 29). Stephanie Greaney, ERO’s evaluation services manager, reinforced the reality of the pile-up of assessments experienced by students, like the girls in this study, when she said that “some teachers are deciding on assessments without knowing what other assessments the student has for that week” (Scoop Media, 2015). Some principals have noticed the problem also. Last year, Wellington Girls’ College principal Julia Davidson stated on National Radio that “the weight of assessment is bearing down on them to the point where learning has stopped being fun and assessment is driving everything they do” (Sziranyi, 2015). Also last year, the NZCER-published document *NCEA in context* (Hipkins, Johnston, & Sheehan, 2016) concluded that schools are doing too much assessment and that this puts relentless pressure on students throughout the year.

### **Key Conclusion 3:**

#### **Expectations affect students’ wellbeing.**

In addition to school-based pressure, students in this study believed that expectations from the school, from their parents and from their peers and themselves added to their stress and negatively affect their wellbeing. Although some parents were very aware of the stress their daughters are under, and were actively trying to help them maintain balance in their lives, this was not enough to negate the expectations from teachers, the school itself, their peers or themselves. The girls in this study believed that they had higher expectations placed on them than their peers at other schools. This manifested itself in a ‘background’ school expectation of high achievement, but also more concretely in teachers who said things that implied that these girls must work harder because they are at a high achieving school. The participants expressed the conflict they felt between wanting to achieve highly, but also being aware that their wellbeing was suffering.

The literature would suggest that these are not new experiences for students at high-achieving schools (Luthar et al., 2013; Nordmo & Samara, 2009; Pope, 2001; Robertson, 2013). In addition, the literature suggests that these expectations can have

negative impacts on student emotion and overall anxiety (Duckett et al., 2008; Locker & Cropley, 2004; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Sharma & Sud, 1990). Like the Rubie-Davies et al. (2010) study, the students in this research also feel “overburdened by parents’ unrealistically high expectations to succeed” (p.49), concurrently being aware that they also put pressure on themselves. It has been suggested by Robertson (2013) that the impact of peer comparisons on high-achieving students is a topic that warrants investigation. As in this study, Duckett et al (2008) found that although adults think that high expectations are pre-requisites for positive wellbeing, students themselves view pressure to succeed academically “as leading to negative wellbeing” (p. 96).

#### **Key Conclusion 4:**

##### **Systems in these schools need to change.**

The girls in all three schools in this study expressed frustration at the seeming lack of coordination and planning between departments, which resulted in sometimes accidental and sometimes deliberate timetabling of assessments, either close to each other or close to special events like the Ball or mock exams. These calendar decisions had a significant negative effect on their wellbeing, according to the girls. Every member of every focus group and every interviewee at every school pleaded for this to change. They want well-spaced assessments, and not too many, and they want different areas of the school to cooperate with each other so that they are not having to deal with clashes and are not overloaded at certain pressure-point times of the year.

Once again, this lack of secondary schools’ response to the overloading of student assessment has been documented in New Zealand in the ERO’s *Wellbeing for young people’s success at secondary school* (Education Review Office, 2015). In addition, as noted previously, Stephanie Grearney - of ERO - suggests that schools need to help student wellbeing by changing their curriculum and assessment practices. She states that “well planned, considered assessment that takes a cross-curricular approach would reduce pressure for students and teachers” (Scoop Media, 2015). In another interview, she goes on to extrapolate on the ERO report described above, confirming that assessment is contributing to anxiety, that the students feel disempowered, and that a large part of the problem is too many assessments happening at the same time. As I found in this study, the ERO report also concluded that the students think that the

teachers do not know about this issue. The ERO report concludes, however, that teachers do know about over-assessment and clashing assessments, but they appear not to know how to solve these problems.

**Key conclusion 5:**

**The participants' responses in this study suggest that it is crucial for their high-decile, high performing single-sex schools to address student wellbeing needs urgently.**

Three out of twenty-two participants in this study admitted in a group situation to having been treated for anxiety and depression issues. A number of others described behaviours that would suggest these issues, such as over-sleeping, and crying a lot, or taking a lot of days off school. Other participants described friends and sisters who have experienced significant mental health issues due to the stress they experienced at school. Overall, the impression I received from these mostly high achieving students is a sense that they survive school, rather than thrive in it.

This experience is reflected in the literature on students in high performing schools in high socio-economic communities. Far from being the success stories that we would expect from students in these environments, studies show that the “privileged young are much more vulnerable today than in previous generations” (Luthar et al., 2013, p. 65). Other researchers have discussed in detail the effects of achievement pressure on students from high socio-economic communities, suggesting that “unremitting academic pressure leads to depression, anxiety, even suicide in some children, and a debilitating sense of not being able to keep up in many more” (Levine, 2008, p. 30). We are warned that the pervasive emphasis both schools and their privileged communities place on going to a ‘good’ university and getting a ‘good’ job in order to achieve long-term happiness, has consequences, and we should “not lose sight of the possible costs to the mental health and wellbeing of all concerned” (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005, p. 52).

Finally, in regard to students from high performing schools in high-decile communities, there is a repeated call in the literature not to overlook these young people (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Pope, 2001; Rainey, 2013; Yates et al., 2008). Luthar and others have consistently called for an end to the neglect of these so-called ‘privileged’ youth, who have been “treated, thus far, as not needing (our) attention” (Luthar & Latendresse,

2005, p. 49). The findings from this study make this call vitally important in New Zealand also. There appears to be a silent crisis in the schools participating in this study. It would seem, with the consistency of the responses across all three schools, and the mirroring of these findings in the literature, that these findings are likely to be reflected in other similar schools in New Zealand.

## **Recommendations**

The findings of this study have led to the development of six recommendations. It is worth noting that these recommendations may be relevant to any high-decile high performing single-sex girls' school within New Zealand. These findings could also be applicable to other types of schools in New Zealand. Even though this is a small-scale study, readers may choose to transfer these conclusions to their own context. These recommendations fall into two categories: those applicable at the school level; and those applicable at the government level.

### **School-level recommendations**

1. That school leaders in high-decile, high performing single-sex schools urgently address the wellbeing needs of their students by looking at the systems in their schools that are adding to student stress and anxiety. In particular, it is recommended that schools address the timetabling and quantity of assessments to avoid over-assessing and over-burdening students with clashing assessments. All schools should have an online assessment calendar that teachers, students and parents can access, and that care is taken to spread assessments out over the year. It is suggested that one person in the school have ultimate control over this calendar, and any changes to assessment times or days be directed/requested through that person. This would limit clashes and would be a transparent way of keeping everyone informed and aware of assessments and their consequent stresses.
2. That school leaders reframe their expectations about what it means to be a successful school and to include wellbeing criteria in what they measure. This will require significant professional development of both teaching staff and school leaders. Once again, this recommendation needs a 'driver', probably on the senior leadership team, in order to keep this realigning of values at the forefront of teachers minds. Schools could publish wellbeing news in their

newsletter and other publications, such as the local newspaper. This will result in the values of balance and wellbeing being understood and taken on by the community also.

3. That school leaders make provision for students to be able to have their voices heard. Students are the only ones who understand the competing demands on them, and it is imperative for school leaders to hear about their experiences in order to be effective in making positive change. A senior leader in the school could run focus groups, preferably led by someone in the community, rather than by a teacher or senior leader, in order to facilitate a sense of safety and honesty. Other ideas are for schools to set-up an email address for students to voice their concerns, experiences or ideas. Once again, this should be managed by someone the students trust.

### **Government-level recommendations**

1. That the Ministry of Education overtly publicise their concerns about assessment overload and student wellbeing. Although they have begun this with the ERO report *Wellbeing for Young People's Success at Secondary School* (Education Review Office, 2015), the findings of this study would suggest that the message has not yet made any impact on the experience of girls at high-decile, high performing single-sex schools. More practical advice and ideas for reducing over-assessment and creating more balanced school environments could be provided to schools. Schools would take this more seriously if recommendation 3, below, is also implemented.
2. That NZQA identifies and implements mechanisms designed to achieve greater assessment consistency both within and across schools. This could be achieved by adding criteria to the internal assessment moderation process whereby schools have to outline their assessment process, including how many hours students spent, or were expected to spend, on each assessment. Schools could also monitor this internally by asking students how much time they spent on each internal assessment, and reporting on this internal moderation to NZQA.
3. That the government initiates a process to evaluate student wellbeing in all schools in order to make schools accountable for more than just their academic results. This would be a complicated but beneficial task. It could possibly be incorporated in ERO's mandate. When ERO visits schools, they could add to

their list of questions that they ask students about their school, questions about the number of credits students were expected to sit, their levels of stress and worry, and what opportunities they had to express their concerns or experiences. ERO could also request schools provide data about student wellbeing, including numbers of credits offered, and evidence of significant attempts to avoid assessment clashes.

### **Limitations of the study**

The first limitation is that because of the small number of research participants, it is possible that the findings and, therefore, the ensuing conclusions, may not be an accurate representation of the perceptions and experiences of Year 13 girls in all New Zealand high-decile, high performing single-sex schools. As Brown (2005) states however, small scale qualitative studies can be generalised and applied to other settings if the readers see clear contextual links. This means that it is up to the readers of this research to evaluate the extent to which the findings and conclusions can be applied to their own settings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The second limitation is that it is possible that girls who felt strongly about the issue may have volunteered to be participants, whereas girls who were happy with the status quo may not have been interested in participating. It is also possible that those girls who volunteered were the ones who were the most balanced, in that they felt comfortable giving up an hour or more of their time. If this was the case, the findings may be only 'scratching the surface' of the issues for girls in these schools.

### **Suggestions for future research**

This research has highlighted possibilities for future research. These possibilities include:

- A more in-depth and wide-ranging study exploring the experience of students across, firstly, high-decile, high performing single-sex girls' schools in New Zealand, and then, secondly, widening this to include boys' schools, state schools and schools with other decile ratings and achievement profiles; and
- A closer investigation into the way NCEA is implemented in schools, and, in particular, the variations in standards across different types of schools.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored the experience of year 13 girls' in three high-decile, high performing single-sex secondary schools in New Zealand. The findings and recommendations add to the body of literature relating to the wellbeing of students at these schools and will be available to school leaders and schools who may be interested in reviewing their assessment and wellbeing systems. There is a need for school leaders to take a proactive approach in addressing the wellbeing needs of their students, firstly by looking at assessment and the systems around that, and secondly by making real changes that will positively impact on the students' wellbeing.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Participant information sheets



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

#### Participant Information Sheet

Focus groups

Date Information Sheet Produced:

14 April 2016

#### Project Title

‘An investigation into the wellbeing of Year 13 girls at high decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand’.

#### An Invitation

Kia ora,

My name is Nicky Whitham-Blackwell. Most of the time I am the Year 13 Dean at\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*, but this year I am on study leave to complete my Master of Educational Leadership at AUT University. In my research for my thesis, I am investigating what it is like to be a Year 13 girl in a high decile, high achieving single-sex school, studying for NCEA. So that means talking to students like you. I would love for you to be involved in my research, so that your voices and opinions are heard. I am looking for 10-12 students to take part in two focus groups, which is where you all talk to me in a group about what it’s like to be you in New Zealand in the 21st century, as a Year 13 student studying for NCEA. This is a completely voluntary invitation, and even if you volunteer, if at any time you would like to withdraw from the research, you are absolutely free to do so. However, while you may withdraw from the focus group itself at any time, due to the nature of focus groups withdrawal of data is not possible. I will only use the information for my thesis and for academic journal articles and conference presentations.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

The focus of this research is an investigation into what it is like to be a girl in Year 13 in a high-decile, high achieving single-sex school, in particular in relation to the three year

assessment system in New Zealand called NCEA. The purpose of this research is to complete my Master's degree, but also to really understand what it's like for you in this environment of NCEA and high expectations and then to be able to explain that to other people.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You responded to my invitation at your assembly. This means you are in your third year of NCEA and attend a high-decile, high achieving single-sex school. If you are not in your third year of NCEA, or under 16 years of age, then unfortunately you don't qualify for this research, because I am looking at what the impact of three years of assessment has on you.

### **What will happen in this research?**

You, as a member of a focus group, will tell me what it's like for you in this type of environment, including the pros and cons of NCEA and how you manage balance and wellbeing in your life. You will use pseudonyms, and I will record what you say so that I can analyse it afterwards.

If you are interested in taking part in this research, please email me. None of the staff at your school will know if you are taking part or not. If more than 12 people volunteer, I will pick 12 people who represent a diverse range, for example Arts students and Sciences students, or a variety of ethnicities. I will email you back to arrange a time for us to meet together. It will probably be during lunchtime, and I will provide some extra nibbles to add to your own lunch, which you will be able to eat while we have our discussion.

### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

I don't expect you will feel any discomfort or risk, unless of course you eat too much!

### **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

However, if you should feel uncomfortable, you may choose to withdraw from the session at any time, or simply choose not to respond to or answer a question. (However, while you may withdraw from the focus group itself at any time, due to the nature of focus groups withdrawal of data is not possible).

### **What are the benefits?**

The benefits for you are that you get to reflect on what it's like to be sitting NCEA in an environment that has high expectations of you, and your voice can be heard in relation to your own experience. The benefits for the wider education community are that the results of this research may help with structures and policies that are really in your best interests. And of course the benefit for me is that I get to complete my Thesis! Your school may be interested in my results to help shape structures and policies going forward.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

I will be using your chosen pseudonym in my thesis, and your school will not be identified either. The school will only be identified as a "high-decile, high achieving,

single-sex girls' school in New Zealand". We will be meeting in a private adult meeting room, probably during lunchtime so other students will not see your involvement. However, as we will be a group, I can only provide limited confidentiality, as you will know who the other students in the group are, and they will know who you are.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The only cost to you is your time. This would be one and a half hours for the focus group session.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have one week from today to let me know that you would like to participate.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you email me your willingness to participate, I will send you a consent form to complete. You can bring your signed consent form to the focus group session.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes. I will send you a 1-2 page summary of what I found in the research.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, [alison.smith@aut.ac.nz](mailto:alison.smith@aut.ac.nz), (09) 9219999 ext 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Nicky Whitham-Blackwell, \*\*\*\*\*@gmail.com, 021#####.

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Alison Smith, [alison.smith@aut.ac.nz](mailto:alison.smith@aut.ac.nz), (09) 9219999 ext 7363

If you have any concerns about how you feel after the focus group discussion, please contact your school counsellor:

Name:

Phone number:

Email:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on May 2, 2016.  
AUTEK Reference number 16/134.*

## **Participant Information Sheet**

Interviews

Date Information Sheet Produced:

14 April 2016

### **Project Title**

‘An investigation into the wellbeing of Year 13 girls at high decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand’.

### **An Invitation**

Kia ora,

My name is Nicky Whitham-Blackwell. Most of the time I am the Year 13 Dean at Carmel College, but this year I am on study leave to complete my Master of Educational Leadership at AUT University. In my research for my thesis, I am investigating what it is like to be a Year 13 girl in a high decile, high achieving single-sex school. So that means talking to students like you. I would love for you to be involved in my research, so that your voices and opinions are heard. I am looking for one student to take part in an interview, which is where you will talk to me about what it’s like to be you in New Zealand in the 21st century, as a Year 13 student studying NCEA. This is a completely voluntary invitation, and even if you volunteer, if at any time you would like to withdraw from the research, you are absolutely free to do so. I will only use the information for my thesis and for academic journal articles and conference presentations.

### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The focus of this research is an investigation into what it is like to be a girl in Year 13 in a high-decile, high achieving single-sex school, in particular in relation to the three year assessment system in New Zealand called NCEA. The purpose of this research is to complete my Masters Degree, but also to make visible what it’s like for you in this environment of NCEA and high expectations.

### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

As you volunteered for and took part in the focus group earlier, and you qualified to go on to an interview. You are receiving this now because you offered your time for an interview.

### **What will happen in this research?**

I will ask you more questions, similar to the ones we discussed in the focus group, but this time you will get to expand on and give more depth and examples to your answers. Again, this will take place after school, in an adult meeting room, to protect your confidentiality as much as possible.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

I don't expect you will feel any discomfort or risk.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

However, if you should feel uncomfortable you may terminate the interview at any time you wish to, or you may simply choose not to answer any particular question.

**What are the benefits?**

The benefits for you are that you get to reflect on what it's like to be sitting NCEA in an environment that has high expectations of you, and your voice can be heard in relation to your own experience. The benefits for the wider education community are that the results of this research may help with structures and policies that are really in your best interests. And of course the benefit for me is that I get to complete my thesis! I also think I will be able to take what I learn back to my school to better support the girls like you there.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

I will be using your chosen pseudonyms in my thesis, and the school will not be identified either. The school will only be identified as a "high decile, high achieving, single-sex girls' school in New Zealand". You will email me directly about participating, so no staff here at your school will know who is involved. We will be meeting in a private adult meeting room, probably after school, so other students or staff will not see your involvement.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

This will be another hour of your time, on top of the 90 minutes you have already spent in the focus group. You will also need to allow another hour to go over the transcript of your interview.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have already volunteered at the end of the focus group. If you change your mind you may withdraw at any time up to one week from receipt of this form.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

You complete another consent form that is attached to this letter.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes. I will send you a 1-2 page summary of what I found in the research.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, Alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, (09) 9219999 ext 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Nicky Whitham-Blackwell, \*\*\*\*\*@gmail.com, 021#####.

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Alison Smith, Alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, (09) 9219999 ext 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on May 2, 2016. AUTEK Reference number 16/134.

## Appendix B: Consent forms



### Consent Form

Interviews

#### Project title:

An investigation into the wellbeing (hauora) of Year 13 girls in high decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand.

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Nicky Whitham-Blackwell

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmm yyyy.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes   
No

Participant's  
signature:.....

Participant's  
name:.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted *May 2, 2016 AUTEK Reference number 16/134.*

Note: The participant should retain a copy of this form.

## Consent Form

Focus Groups

### Project title:

An investigation into the wellbeing (hauora) of Year 13 girls in high-decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand.

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Nicky Whitham-Blackwell

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmm yyyy.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, the relevant information about myself including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will not be used.

I agree to take part in this research.

I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes   
No

Participant's

signature:.....

Participant's

name:.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted May 2, 2016 AUTEK Reference number 16/134.*

Note: The participant should retain a copy of this form.

**AUT**TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU**Parent/Guardian Consent Form****Project title:**

An investigation into the wellbeing (hauora) of Year 13 girls in high-decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand.

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Nicky Whitham-Blackwell

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 14 April 2016.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw my child/children and/or myself or any information that we have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If my child/children and/or I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to my child/children taking part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes   
No

Child/children's

name/s.....

Parent/Guardian's

signature:.....

Parent/Guardian's

name:.....

Parent/Guardian's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date on which the final approval was granted May 2, 2016 AUTEK Reference number 16/134.*

Note: The participant should retain a copy of this form.

## Appendix C: Letter to Principals

The logo for AUT University, featuring the letters 'AUT' in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a black rectangular background.

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TAMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Dd/mm/2016

Dear (Principal)

My name is Nicky Whitham-Blackwell and I am currently completing a Master of Educational Leadership at AUT University. I have been the Year 13 Dean at a high achieving, high-decile girls' school for five years, and have become very interested in the wellbeing of girls at schools like mine and yours.

After reviewing the literature, I have discovered that there is research overseas to show that girls suffer more from test anxiety than do boys, and that girls in high achieving single-sex schools are the most vulnerable. However there does not appear to be any research in New Zealand on this issue, and with NCEA being the only three year high-stakes assessment system in the world, I believe it is time we obtained some New Zealand data using New Zealand students' voices.

Therefore, following on from past research, and the seeming gap in New Zealand data, the main research question is:

'What is the experience of young women in high-decile, high-achieving single-sex girls' secondary schools in relation to their own wellbeing when participating in the current National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessment system in New Zealand?'

As a woman researching young women, in an educational context, this research falls under a social science umbrella and utilizes a qualitative method that is paradigmatically feminist and critical.

I would like to conduct two focus groups, with five or six girls in each group, and one interview, following on from the focus group with a volunteer from that focus group.

Participation is of course voluntary. I would hope to speak at a Year 13 assembly to introduce my research to the students and ask for volunteers. If this is not possible, I could provide a flyer to be posted around the school asking for volunteers.

Neither the participants nor the school will be identified in any way in the publication of this research. I will be describing the school in any context as a 'high decile, high achieving, single-sex girls' school in New Zealand'.

I would really appreciate your support in allowing me to conduct this research in your school. I would be happy to return to present my findings to your staff or Board if you felt it would be beneficial to them.

Please find attached also the participant information sheets that will be distributed to volunteer participants.

You may reach me at \*\*\*\*\*, or by phone on #####.

Yours sincerely,

Nicky Whitham-Blackwell

## Appendix D: Indicative questions for focus groups



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

### 1. Indicative focus group questions

#### 1. Introductions.

Researcher to introduce herself and explain her background and her interest in the topic.

Participants asked to introduce themselves with chosen pseudonyms.

2. I would like to find out what your experience of NCEA is like?

3. What do you like about NCEA?

4. What do you dislike about NCEA?

5. Do you think NCEA is balanced and manageable in your school? How does it affect your wellbeing?

6. What makes NCEA -balanced/ unbalanced?

-manageable/ unmanageable?

7. How do you ensure wellbeing and balance in your whole life (not just school time, homework time)

(prompts for researcher: sport/fitness?

church?

family?

friends?

hobbies?

time just for you?)

8. How have the demands of NCEA affected your social activities/family life/wellbeing?

9. What could the leaders of this school do, or do the leaders of this school do, to help you manage the demands of NCEA and have a healthy wellbeing?

10. Do you feel that the leadership of the school is open to listening to your concerns about wellbeing?

11. What avenues do you use to voice your concerns? Who do you go to? Do you feel that you are going to be listened to? Are your concerns taken seriously?

12. What else do you think it is important for me to know in investigating the issue of wellbeing for girls in contexts like yours in their third year of NCEA?

## Appendix E: Indicative questions for interviews



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

### Indicative interview questions

1. You said in the focus group that..... Can you tell me more about why you said that/ why you feel that way?
2. Can you tell me more about how you think you are achieving or not achieving balance in your life right now?
3. What is it about your experience at school that helps or hinders your ability to have balance in your life?
4. What do you think school leaders could do to help support your ability to have balance in your life?
5. What is your experience of teachers/parents/peers' expectations for your achievement?
6. How do teachers/peers/parents' expectations affect how you perform or feel about your achievement in NCEA?
7. Do you feel that the leadership of the school is open to listening to your concerns about wellbeing? If so, what makes you feel that way? If not, what is it that makes you think they are not open to this?
8. What avenues do you use to voice your concerns? Who do you go to? Do you feel that you are going to be listened to? How do you know that your concerns will be taken seriously?
9. When you are stressed (by situations such as [ stressors participants mentioned earlier] what do you tend to do?
  - Probe: What else do you do when you're feeling stress?
  - Cue: Who (else) do you turn to for advice in times of stress?
10. Out of all the things you have tried to do in the past in order to help yourself feel better, which things (activities, behaviour) were effective in helping you cope?
11. Which things that you did in response to stress have not been effective in helping you cope?
12. We've talked about school stressors a lot today – what is most important in handling stress caused by school?

13. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of NCEA that might help future school leaders or future policy makers?

## Appendix F: Transcriber confidentiality agreement



### Confidentiality Agreement

**Project title: An investigation into the wellbeing (hauora) of Year 13 girls in high decile, high achieving single-sex schools in New Zealand.**

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Nicky Whitham-Blackwell

- I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's signature:.....

Transcriber's name:.....

Date:.....

Transcriber's Contact Details:

.....  
.....

Project Supervisor's Contact Details:

Alison Smith: alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, (09) 9219999 ext. 7363

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on May 2, 2016  
AUTEK Reference number 16/134.*

Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.