**EXPLORING *POSITIVE* CROSS-GENDER PEER RELATIONS – YEAR
10 STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON CROSS-GENDER FRIENDSHIPS**

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Abstract

Much of the current academic and policy literature on gender and inclusive education calls for schools and teachers to move towards understanding gender as a multi-dimensional process of negotiated social relations that is informed by a range of discursive practices – but how students themselves are able to conceptualise gender relations in these ways is under researched. This paper reports on an aspect of an exploratory study that had as its focus students' perceptions of cross cultural and cross gender friendships. This project, funded by a small Australian Research Council grant from La Trobe University, began with surveys of year 10 students at two schools that have previously participated in gender reform projects. Those students who indicated they had cross category friendships were then interviewed to elicit narratives that depict their perspectives on these friendships. Teacher interviews were also conducted to enable a fuller reading both of the practices of schools and the ways these practices are read by students as compared with teachers. This paper will consider some students' narrative accounts of one aspect of this study, the cross-gender friendships.

Introduction and Context of projectⁱ

Over the past two decades, there has been a renewed attention to gender and ethnic dimensions of students and school life. The literature (eg., Connell, 1995; Mac en Ghail, 1996; Davies, 1989; Hey, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1997; Walker, 1988; Willis, 1977; Yates, 1993) has focussed on tracking and interpreting the workings of gendered identities in producing divisions between groups of students, in contributing to alienation from school and practices of bullying and harassment, and in producing patterns of subject-choice and self-esteem that create successful educational pathways for some, and restricted pathways for others.

At the same time, there has been a stream of education policies, funding and professional development programs designed to modify students' identities and relations, in so far as these are seen as restricting their future lives or creating adverse educational contexts, (eg., Allard, et. al, 1995; DEETYA, 1995; MCEETYA, 1997).

Broadly the emphasis of research in this period has been on identifying negative characteristics of students and peer relationships, and the emphasis on policy-making and school reform initiatives has been on issuing directives for making schools more 'inclusive' and for developing 'accepting, mutually respectful interpersonal relationships' (MCEETYA, 1997: 12). This is a period when negative aspects of peer relations have been of concern in schools: racism, sexual harassment, bullying and violence have received extensive attention. However students who are able to move beyond limited and limiting social relations, who are able to establish friendships with peers across gender and ethnic differences, have not received the same attention as those who fail to do so.

The study reported on in this paper takes a different approach from previous research by focusing on 'positive' examples and student narratives of cross gender friendships. Recent research (Collins, Batten, Ainley and Getty, 1996) found that 69.5% of Victorian students agreed that 'it is normal to have friends of both sexes', but could say little more about the meanings and practices which produce such findings. This study aimed to provide new insights into possibilities and problems of school practices, by focussing on the strongest end of supportive peer relations.

This paper discusses findings relating to one part of the project. Our focus is on how students are constructing the form and benefits of the 'cross-category' friendships in relation to gender differences. We look at the way gender difference is depicted, evaluated and/or glossed over when students discuss their 'cross-category' friendships and consider some possible implications for practice or further research related to what they say.

Methodology

The material in this article is drawn from focus group interviews with students at one Melbourne outer-suburban secondary school. It is a co-educational school with students drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Initially all students in year 10 at this schoolⁱⁱ were surveyed about their friendships. The survey questions were adapted from those used in the ACER national survey, by Collins, Batten, Ainley, and Getty (1996. 'Friend' was defined in the survey to mean 'a person known well to another and regarded with liking, affection, and loyalty.'

Following the survey, small focus group interviews of approximately 40 minutes each were conducted with students who indicated that they had strong cross category friendships and who volunteered to be interviewed. The questions within these interviews covered the types of activities shared, leadership and decision-making within cross-category friendship groups, types of conflicts and how these are resolved and students' perspectives on how schooling practices provided opportunities or worked as constraints in relation to their friendships. Narratives of positive friendship experiences were solicited.

In other parts of the project, not discussed in this paper, similar interviews were conducted with students at a second school and teacher interviews were also conducted to gain teacher perspectives on the same set of issues and to enable a fuller reading both of the practices of schools and the ways these practices are read by teachers compared with students.

The school whose students are discussed in this paper is Rivers Secondary College, (a pseudonym is used in order to honour our guarantee of confidentiality), a relatively new (15 years) and expanding school in the outer suburbs of Melbourne with a student population of 1300. The 40 students in this school who volunteered to be interviewed came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including Turkish, Italian, Greek, Anglo-celtic and Vietnamese. Although most were born in Australia, for many of these students, English is a second language. Students were interviewed in small (3-5) groups and, as far as possible, with friends whom they had named.

It is not assumed that the interview material is a transparent window to practices. But it is assumed that the terms in which students talk about these issues can be a source of some insight about the meanings that are part of their practices. In the following sections, we consider firstly how 'friendship' in general was constructed in the comments of these students and the ways in which cross-gender friendships appeared to be constructed differently from same-gender friendships. Additionally, particular schooling practices that students identified as either helping or hindering their friendships are noted. Finally, we raise a number of questions concerning how current theoretical and policy frameworks intersect with, or contradict these students' constructions of positive relations with peers.

Overview: Constructions of 'friendship'

On the basis of the students' survey responses and the interview comments, three key ideas were reiterated when students discussed friendships in general. These were that:

- a) friends are loyal (loyalty appears to take the form of being able to keep secrets and to 'stand by' your friends). For example:

I have a lot of friends of both sexes. I don't choose my friends because of what they look like.

They are my friends because they can be trusted with a secret and have shown loyalty to me.

(Year 10 female)

If you can't trust your friends with your secrets, who can you really trust? (Year 10 female)

Your real friends know you, stick by your side, know what you're thinking about, like if you're thinking about something, they've usually got the same idea. They're always there to help you out...Loyalty plays a big part – loyalty and not lying to your friends. (Year 10 male).

b) friends provide advice and teach you about yourself:

We find each other's strengths through friendship. With friends of the opposite sex we learn and understand how we cope with the same situations. I believe friends are an important part of growing up. Parents shouldn't hold you down from seeing them just because they are a different race, colour or gender. They become a part of our lives. (Year 10 female)

Friendships to me are very important to have because you need friends to stand by you and help you with things that you have trouble understanding, like school-work or other problems, etc. (Year 10 female)

c) friends are necessary to help one through the 'tough times':

There are people here who are very sceptical, judgemental and narrow minded. The friendship groups are so strong that if there is a conflict, you can be sure that others will back you up in any situation. They will stand by you. Our friends try to help. Even when you're too broke to fix, someone will always be there. (Year 10 female)

I think that friendships at school are important because they help you get through tough times. (Year 10 male)

Overall, the friendships going on in this school are very strong and very involved. (Year 10 male)

Loyalty, trust, advice, support, and secrets – these words were used frequently in the interviews as well as in students’ written survey comments – although ‘keeping secrets’ seemed to be of greater significance to the girls than to the boys.

Additionally, among some of the students, the pressure to conform to particular forms of friendship appeared to present some difficulties:

You should not be discouraged because your friend doesn’t like what you like. Your own opinion matters. (Year 10 female)

I think that to have a happy friendship you need to know who your friends are. You have to feel comfortable to be around them and to give your own opinion. You also have to feel that you can be/do what you want to be/do. (Year 10 female)

Friendships are important to have, although it is even more important for friends to be loyal. School gives students a chance to make friends. Sometimes there’s pressure on individuals to perform/appear to be up to their friends’ standards. (Year 10 female)

I do not have many friends because I am different. Most people tease me at school and this upsets me. (Year 10 male).

From the above comments, a certain tension appears between constituting friendships as based on loyalty and the desire on the part of some students to establish and maintain their own individual opinions. This suggests some of the ways that the meanings and forms of 'friendship', as constructed by these groups of students, can be read as a contested discourse in which contradictory positions are taken up.

Cross-gender friendships

While all the students interviewed claimed to have cross-gender friendships, such friendships appeared to take different forms than those they shared with the same sex. That is, although loyalty, advice and support were constructed as the linchpins of 'friendships' in general by these students, the ways in which these attributes were understood to operate across gender boundaries were subtly different.

Friendship with girls is different from friendship with boys

i Girls on friendship with boys

When girls were asked what they valued about having friends who were boys, many noted the pleasure gained from just 'talking' with boys. However, concerning what was talked about, they differentiated between what could be discussed in cross-gender friendship groups compared to what could be discussed in all-girl friendship groups.

I think with girls, a lot of girls in general can be bitchy. Girls get jealous of little things about guys and things like that. But guys don't.

But there are things that you can talk to a girl that you can't talk to a guy and about.

They say, 'What are you on about?'

Like if you talk to a guy about a guy, they're not interested.

Yeah, why should they be?

Depends on who it is – girls give more advice.

If you need advice, you can go to the guys too to get a guy's point of view like their opinion.

Yeah, it just depends on the person, though. Guys are all different.

They wouldn't sit there like a half an hour like we would.

Yeah. They'll change the topic straight-away.

Yeah, like they've got different interests. From us.

(Interview with three Year 10 females).

Comments from another group of girls suggested another distinction between being friends with boys and friends with girls:

...with the guys, you muck around, you don't sit there and tell them who you like. You laugh, talk a bit, muck around, make fun of someone.

So, for these girls, the positive aspect of friendship with boys was the avoidance of some of the tensions related to intimacy with other girls (who could be 'bitchy' and get 'jealous'), and a certain ease and light-heartedness in the times spent in cross gender friendships together. However, compared with friendship with other girls, they did not expect to freely range over the whole gamut of their interests (since boys wouldn't take up the topic if they weren't interested), and did not expect as much advice or the long, intense conversations.

ii Boys on friendship with girls

Where girls tended to classify personal advice or advice about relationships among the subjects they would not expect to get from boys who were friends, in contrast, boys saw friendship with girls as providing this sort of support, and advice of a kind they would not expect from other boys:

You can get – say there's a girl you like and you're embarrassed to go speak to them, you can get a friend to set you up with her and it's a lot more effective than to get a guy to go speak to her...Like they, (girls), say you got clothes on, they can say, they can tell you about clothes that look good.

Yeah, 'cos they know about fashion.

They [girls] look at a guy and they'll say, 'I seen a guy wear this and I think you'd look really nice in this, try it on.' So if I go shopping and these guys go with me and I try something on, they'll say it looks good. Even if it looks ugly, they'll say it looks good. But if I go with a girl, they'll say, 'Oh I reckon it's too short or you need it tighter around the waist – I seen it last week on another guy' – you know what I mean? They can give you the advice that helps you.

Good advice about relationships. Say they're going out with someone, they'll tell you the story of what he done and that's like good advice because you can do it too. Things like that, they tell you things that they like – because a guy's not going to know what a girl likes. Very good advice. (Interview with three boys)

(Stereotyped) gender roles are assumed

In these discussions concerning their cross gender friendships, two things are notable. Firstly, what girls seem to get from these relationships is relaxation, 'time out' from intense 'girl friendships'; and what boys value is a degree of instrumental help to their own agendas; secondly, in these cross-gender friendships, each group seems to be wanting from the other the things that are classically or stereotypically associated with the other's gender (ie., boys want from girls' their skills with clothes as well as relationship advice; girls value boys' lack of intense emotional engagement).

Gender hierarchies are often taken-for-granted

While the girls, above, assumed that boys' interests would determine what topics they could discuss, the boys' comments too were couched in terms of girls' usefulness to

boys' interests. This does not mean that their practices were necessarily constrained to this extent, but it is interesting that they were unselfconscious about presenting their practice in these terms. Other examples of this were also apparent.

Additionally, while loyalty was deemed to be a crucible on which friendships were made or broken, girls in one interview at least did not appear to expect such loyalty in cross gender friendships.

You can't really tell the guys anything, because you can't know who'll find out if you tell them...guys are worse than girls, they like gossip more than us. (Interview with three girls).

Betrayal through gossip, not keeping secrets, was a cardinal sin amongst girls – but for this group of girls to maintain friendships with guys meant that they kept secrets from them, rather than with them. Self monitoring was necessary.

Additionally, one group of boys expressed resentment toward particular girls who ignored their overtures of friendship. Such a rejection was made sense of, by these boys, by arguing that the girls had taken other boys' comments too seriously. They appeared unwilling to believe that the girls themselves might reject their friendship. They said:

There are some girls that are good to muck around with, some who are just like the guys – and [there are] others who don't talk to you, have big heads...you go to talk to them and they just don't want to know.

[What gives them 'a big head'?]

Appearance.

Probably guys who say, 'She's all right' and it starts to get to them.

(Interview with three boys).

A certain hierarchy of status appears to be constructed in the comments. In the opinion of these boys, the girls' higher status had been granted to them by (other) males, not earned, and was only gained on the basis of their appearance. That males 'grant' status to females appears to operate as part of a taken for granted gender stereotype within this group of boys.

A related aspect of cross gender friendships was suggested by a particular group of boys who focussed on the fact that because *girls were girls*, they presented no overt competition in terms of appearance or status. Other boys could and did. While the year 10 male below appears to confuse 'envious' with 'jealous', the narrative that he tells sheds light on what he sees as valuable about having girls who are friends. He says:

Boy 1: The most efficient thing about being friends with girls is that you can never get jealous of the opposite sex. I cannot, I can never, ever get jealous of a girl... like I'll go to her, 'Look at the pants I got, look at my hair or look at this nice aftershave I'm wearing.' She can never say, 'Oh, I wish I had that.'

[...] Like my best friend... Like you say [to him], 'I'll do my hair in spikes'. He'll say, 'Your hair, it doesn't look too good.' You know? And then like one week later, two--he'll do it. I'll get a pair of flares, right, and it was my first under-age [party?] and like he went up to everybody telling them how gay I looked. People came up to me, 'Oh, you look gay.' Around six months later, he says to me, 'Oh, come with me, I want to get a pair of flares.' Now if I was to do that with a girl, you can never get jealous of them --like 'Oh your hair looks bad' and then they do it the next day... I reckon that's the reason.

Boy 2: You don't want to look like everyone else. You like to be an individual.

Boy 1: I like to be an individual but if they [male friends] like what I wear, I'd at least like them to say, 'Oh I like these pants--where'd you get them from, I wouldn't mind buying some'...instead of saying how gay they look and stuff. [or saying,] 'I'll never get anything like that' and then the next week they get it. They make me feel bad -- and then they go get it too.

In many ways, the extracts of conversation to this point support Deborah Tannen's (1990, 1993) and Carol Gilligan's (1982, 1990) arguments about gendered agendas. The boys are concerned with competitive judgement by other boys, (and homophobia underpins this concern, in the above example); the girls are concerned with the pressures of intimacy with other girls. However, in contrast to Tannen's arguments, for these girls and boys, the gendered differences and pressures are not the source of mutual misunderstanding, but instead provide a bridge to enjoyment of friendship with the other. In contrast to Gilligan's arguments, the girls in this cohort seemed less

concerned about maintaining intimacy across all their friendships and instead focussed such concerns on their friendships with their female peers.

Conflict within friendships

Students were asked if they had disagreements within their 'friendship groups'. No group of students interviewed cited examples of disputes in cross-gender friendships. Instead, disputes described were always within same gender friendships.

For example one group of girls described a physical fight that had occurred between two 'best friends' that resulted in both girls being suspended. In discussing this incident, they seem to construct a hierarchy of difference: girls fight over 'less important things', they 'take it deeper' and 'girl fights go on forever' whereas boys only fight over a 'good thing', 'hit each other once' and 'get it over and done with'. The two boys who were part of this discussion agreed with the girls' assessment.

Girls maybe they talk it over – boys, maybe they take it out in aggression. A bit more than girls do. I think girls fight over less important things than the guys – with guys it's got to be a good thing--

Yeah, guys just maybe having a good screaming match and get it over and done with but girls will maybe take it more deeper...

When guys do get into a fight they'll hit each other once but girls will keep on getting each other back.

And girls keep bringing up the past over and over again. [...]

So they're not talking at all and it's really hard because they're in the same class all day so they can't really talk.

(I: Do you have any idea about why that happened?)

Some one annoys you for ages and you know you don't really want to start nothing because she's in your class – if you've got an enemy in your class it makes it hard – so you just keep your side and then it builds up and then eventually something little can just set you off.

You know what else I reckon it is? I reckon it's boredom. People get bored and they just start something.

(I: So what will happen to those two girls?) [...]

They'll continue the fight. You know, the second girl's already been threatened. 'I'm going to get someone on to you for scratching my face – I can't believe you did this, I can't believe you did that.'

If that was a guy's fight, it'd be over with by now.

Yeah, because it was a girls' fight it will go on forever. (Interview with three girls, two boys).

An unquestioning acceptance about the 'nature' of boys and the 'nature' of girls seems to be constructed in the above. Differences between how girls and how boys resolve conflicts appear to be normalised, naturalised – and therefore beyond the scope – or hope--of change. The emphasis that the girls place on how unending the conflicts are between girls, again seems to support the argument that friendships with boys are constructed by girls as far less emotionally exhausting or fraught with conflict and as such are a welcome relief. Additionally, girls, according to girls, are far more likely to betray secrets, backstab or carry a grudge, as one girl argued:

Yeah I've got a lot of [girl] friends but I find I'm not so close to them. I find I'm closer to friends of the opposite sex. They're easier to talk to. They can see things from the other side of the fence. Like if you ask them for advice about something they can see it from their point of view. You find that guys don't bitch as much as girls do. Like girls can be very back stabbing whereas guys – they don't care – well they care but they don't go around saying 'Look what she's – or – '

Girls as responsible

While students, when speaking of conflicts that occur in friendship groups cited only conflicts with friends of the same sex, such conflicts could result from cross-gender relations. In these circumstances, it is the girl who is held responsible, by other girls,

and it is she who is 'disciplined' by them, as can be seen in the following discussion among three girls.

I don't like the way she [Carol] acts. She's really a bad flirt...She had this thing like she was better than everyone else...She caused a huge fight, a punch up...She told me that she was going to bash Barbara, and I told Barbara, and they were just arguing and stuff, and one of the guys pushed them together, and then they just started fighting. Happened near the lockers. Also, before, she had said, if there was a fight not to get the teachers involved, but then she went against her word and did get the teachers involved because she thought she would get away with it. That's why Barbara's not here now, she's suspended for two days. And it seemed like the teachers were taking Carol's side, so I went up and put them straight (gave them the background of the fight)...because I thought they had both been involved and should get the same punishment, and Carol was able to twist things and I didn't want her to get away with it, so I told them – didn't lie or anything, just put them straight.

But it won't be resolved when they come back. [...]

She [Carol] caused a lot of problems – I stopped hanging around with their group because of her. I didn't like the way she was with a guy every week. I'm not the kind of person who will stay around with that.

Like she had three boyfriends in two weeks. One boy she talked about getting married to.

She also lied.

She's the only one in our class that no one likes. She sits by herself. She doesn't talk to none of us.

Maybe she felt uncomfortable after that. Because we never told her to go. Maybe she started moving more towards the guys.

Every girl likes the attention from a guy, it's usual. But she goes overboard.

(Interview with three girls)

That 'Carol' deserved to be ostracised because of her proclivity for being with 'a guy every week' operates as a justification for these girls' treatment of her. Within their constructions of 'friendship' Carol fails because she is disloyal, untrustworthy ('she lied') and doesn't keep secrets. The ways in which 'friends' are kept under peer surveillance and disciplined (Foucault, 1977) is highlighted in the above.

Boys as 'heroes' [NB: Andrea – I don't understand why you've given this section this heading?]

Male students also described conflicts between males rather than conflicts between male and female friends. For example, one male told this story of a fight with a friend:

...We were just sitting around and we were sharing a cigarette and I asked him to give me a drag and he said no – just because there were some girls there and the girls go, 'Can you please give him a drag?' and he gave it to me and I go, 'What are you doing,

man?'...He just didn't want to look small in front of the girls and one thing led to another and we ended up having a fight and then friends broke it up and I went my way and he went his way. If that's the way he's going to be, fine – if he didn't want to give me a drag he could just say no. But what's the use of giving in to the girls – he just wanted to be a hero – there's no point – that's the worse thing I hate where you make your friends look bad in front of people. That's so bad...So I just said what I feel...Friendship is not about making your friend look small – you're not a real friend if you're going to do that to a friend.

(Interview with three boys)

Another male describes how a 'best friend' had failed him in the loyalty test:

Boy 1: Like we were riding on our motorbikes and it's illegal and the police caught us and we were good friends for a couple of years now and I got away from the police and he like 'lagged me in' so now I'm in big trouble. I'll get a fine – so it just proves what a good friend he is. [I: So you think he shouldn't have?] Yeah, like he should be like trying to help me – saying that he doesn't know who I am. [I: have you talked to him about it?] Yeah. I don't consider him a friend any more...still see him 'cos he's in my class...but don't talk to him. He says it was an accident but I don't see how.

Boy 2: Most of the time when we have disagreements we just go our separate ways but it's nothing major so I don't care.

(Interview with three boys)

In terms of resolving such conflicts, the boys interviewed said that they either 'go our separate ways' or settle it physically. They too supported the idea that males resolve conflicts more quickly and 'cleanly' than females. However, questions might be asked about whether going their 'separate ways' was a resolution or simply an avoidance of conflict; and whether punching each other up was a useful/productive means of getting to the basis of the problem.

While many of the girls argued that they resolved their differences by talking, clearly there were also occasions where some girls resorted to physical means as well. That all of these strategies were seen to be legitimate, and indeed, that the boys' use of violence was seen by some to be a more efficient and effective way of addressing problems suggests again that there are particular gender stereotypes and hierarchies operating. There was also an unspoken admiration – or at least acceptance – on the part of both girls and boys that it was okay for boys to use physical violence to resolve disputes because this meant that they didn't go on 'forever'. However, when girls resorted to physical violence, this was not seen as a resolution but rather an exacerbation – and deemed to be worthy of condemnation by other girls.

In cross-gender friendships, gender is usually a 'marked' component of the friendshipⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, in terms of cross-gender friendships, what appears to be valued by many of the students are the ways that such friendships take very different forms than those of their same sex friendships. According to these girls, friendships with boys are less 'bitchy', less emotionally demanding, less intense; for these boys, friendships with girls are less competitive, more informative, more helpful than those with their male peers. For most of the students interviewed, gender was not an incidental feature in their friendships,

but a marked component of what they noticed about, and sought from those friendships.

However, several of the boys did state that friends who are girls are 'just like blokes'.

This was viewed by them as a positive:

There's no difference about the girls I know – they are just like blokes. Talk back to you in the same way. Can talk about anything. Could be footy, family, sex.

and

Some girls are almost like guys – talk the same as a guy, act the same as a guy – you don't really realise that they are girls.

Needless to say, there was no parallel example of girls positively approving male friends as 'almost like girls'.

Schooling practices identified by students as addressing cross gender relations.

When asked if, or when, in their classes they discussed cross gender friendships, students (with prompting) cited a number of examples including:

- Year 7-8 home group sessions on bullying;
- Year 10 Commerce where they did 'life-lines' which included how many children they would choose to have, and predicted where they would be in 10 years and in 20 years time;

- Physical Education where they 'did' sex education, although a group of girls noted that

...teachers [were] going on about periods, and guys are going 'oh god' and [we] felt uncomfortable about it.

Another group of boys cited sex education as part of science classes and said:

But you know, we never ever covered it properly. Like I was looking forward to doing sex education but we never actually covered it properly...Like what happened was that people started being childish and they ... started telling jokes.

(Interview with three boys)

- Being together for four years was a reason cited by some of the students that 'they know each other well' and therefore that they were 'friends'. Most classes remained together from year 7-10, although individuals within classes were 'moved' if they proved to be disruptive.

- Use of Student Welfare Coordinator or Year 10 Coordinator for resolving disputes: one group of boys noted that in their class:

A lot of teasing got around: teasing, arguing, little comments that built, got to a point where people didn't like each other and the teacher called the co-ordinator.

- Ways of grouping students in classes varied but most students interviewed specified that they were often allowed to choose the groups they worked with. One group of male students noted that

'...if you misbehave you have to sit by yourself...Yeah, they say, don't sit next to your friends because you'll talk too much, Sit with someone else. In a way (it's fair), in a way it isn't. 'cos they're just looking after you – the only reason they make you sit with

someone else is to make you do the work but if you sit by yourself, then you've got no one to talk to. But you do the work –so it's for the best, I s'pose.

What else the school might do to enable cross boundary friendships

A number of the students stated that they spent a great deal of time talking about gender relations with 'each other', but this was not part of the formal curriculum. They were ambivalent about the desirability of making it part of the curriculum:

I don't think you need to because Year 10 is getting harder – year 7 you're just coming in and so you can spare that class. At year 10 we don't have a class to spare.

I just don't think friendships are an issue any more [ie, by year 10].

Another group expressed similar reservations concerning the worth of spending time discussing cross-gender friendships, arguing that they already learned what they needed to from each other:

You learn from your friends how to solve things – you know what I mean? [...]

You ask them, like what do you think of this, should I do this or should I do this – their opinion.

A number of students insisted that teachers never helped them to develop friendships and some argued that teachers actively worked against such friendships by refusing to allow them to work together. (Note here that we are discussing how students portrayed

their own perspectives on the sources of their experience. These perspectives were not ones necessarily shared by teachers, and nor should we assume that individuals are the authoritative source in explaining what has influenced their views and practices. **NB**

Andrea – I think we need to say something like this here, but see what you think)

To a large extent, the students at Rivers Secondary College appeared to construct cross gender friendships as just a ‘normal’ part of growing up; such friendships happened quite apart from anything the school did, either in terms of schooling practices or specific curricula foci on gender relations. The students appeared to see the ways in which such friendships were constructed as a result of their own skills in providing advice, remaining loyal and such skills were hard-won through personal experiences rather than schooling practices. The teachers’ perspectives concerning the specific practices within the school that have been put in place to assist such friendships suggest a fairly contradictory story to that of the students. However, it is outside the scope of this paper to elaborate on that aspect of the study.

Another way of thinking about this reluctance on the part of these year 10 students to see gender relations/cross gender friendships as an appropriate topic for discussion within the taught curriculum is that they may wish to keep such friendships private and personal. Because ‘keeping secrets’, loyalty and ‘standing by your friends’ were constituted as key elements in these students’ friendships, they may see opening such relations up to adult scrutiny (by making such relations part of specific curriculum) as an unnecessary and unwanted form of surveillance. Such a reading does suggest that

schooling practices to develop '*accepting, mutually respectful interpersonal relationships*' (MCEETYA, 1997: 12), may be more productive at earlier year levels.

Some implications of the findings

This has been a small-scale and exploratory study, but it is pointing to some issues that deserve further research and that raise issues in relation to directions of 'gender equity' and similar policies. For many years, in educational policies and recommended practices that attended to issues of 'gender' in schools, the focus, in terms of relationships, has been on either improving equity and equal relationships between girls and boys (either because girls have been seen as disadvantaged, or, as recently, because boys are seen as 'losing out'); or on the co-education/single-sex debate. Yet within this group of students, same sex friendships were constructed as far more problematic. An issue that this project helps put back on the agenda is the need for attention to problems *within* groups of girls or groups of boys, and that it is quite appropriate to see some aspects of these problems and conflicts as related to gender and gendered ways of being.

Another issue that calls for further exploration is the way in which gender *difference* is constituted as a source of pleasure among these year 10 students. That girls viewed friendships with boys as less troubling than their friendships with girls, and that boys viewed girls as non-competitive and more supportive than their male friends suggests particular 'investments' (Hollway, 1984) in constructing and maintaining such differences.

That such constructions also appeared to endorse gendered hierarchies within cross-gender friendships raises questions concerning the ways that schooling practices might

operate to intervene productively. Because stereotypical gender roles seemed to be treated as taken for granted 'truths' within the meanings and forms of these students' friendships, finding other ways of conceptualising gender relations, ways that enable them to question what and how relations are constituted as 'normal' may prove to be difficult, and yet this is the current thrust of much gender policy in Australia. Given the pleasure that these students appear to gain from gender differences, intervening in such constructions could meet with resistance, and could be viewed, as already suggested, by students as yet another form of (adult) surveillance.

This study, by focussing on positive cross category friendships among Year 10 students, aimed to explore how students constructed friendships across gender boundaries. The girls and boys interviewed were able to speak about how such relations were constituted as pleasurable. As well, their taken-for-granted assumptions suggested some areas of concern. By attending to what students say about the meanings and forms of such relationships, we suggest a number of different questions and directions concerning how schooling practices might address gender relations.

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ⁱ An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education National Conference, Melbourne, Victoria, December, 1999.

ⁱⁱ and at a second school which is not discussed in the present paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ By contrast, we found that students who talked about cross-ethnic friendships commonly stressed what they had in common rather than ethnicity or difference and what this contributed.

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