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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Relational Aggression, Middle School Girls, and the Development of Critical Consciousness

by

Casey Quirarte

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

2014

Relational Aggression, Middle School Girls, and the

Development of Critical Consciousness

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by

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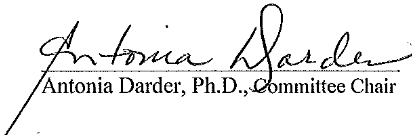
This dissertation written by Jenifer Casey Quirarte, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

12/18/2014
Date

Dissertation Committee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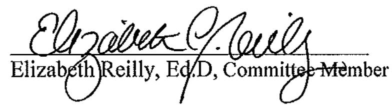
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the strong, beautiful, brave women in my life who inspire me every day and remind me why this work matters.

To my grandmother and godmother, Kathleen Brennan Wall, for teaching me that all women and girls are "beautiful, smart, and compassionate," and that our relationships with one another are incredibly important, thus establishing the cornerstone for this work;

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Relational Aggression, Middle School Girls, and the

Development of Critical Consciousness

by

Casey Quirarte

This study, *Relational Aggression, Middle School Girls, and the Development of Critical Consciousness,* engaged both feminist theory and critical pedagogy as a means to deconstruct the issue of relational aggression among adolescent girls. The objective of this research was to contribute to the growing body of literature pertaining to relational aggression and fill some gaps in the literature surrounding preventative programming. This study investigated the experiences of middle school girls engaged in a solution-oriented approach in order to postulate possible program approaches and educational initiatives to decrease the prevalence of relational aggression in middle school girls. The collection and analysis of the data sought to describe a connection between girls' participation in the program and developing critical consciousness about relational aggression, as well as strategies to address it in their lives. The qualitative data collected in this participatory action research show that relational aggression is much more than a mere "right of passage" or indicate that "mean girls" are a just a normal part of growing up. Relational aggression is harmful, has intense, negative short- and long-term effects,

and—in the lives of the girls I have worked closely with—is very real, incredibly painful, and deeply personal. The findings of this study confirmed that girls benefit from the creation of educative environments, or "safe spaces," where they can dialogue critically with one another about issues that are important to them; this is integral to their socioemotional development in middle school.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

A multitude of signs over the past decade speak to American society's increased willingness to critically engage the issue of bullying in adolescence. The 2012 release of the feature film *Bully* in a few major cities, in addition to national conferences, government-sponsored task forces, webinars, and a variety of websites dedicated to bullying show that concern for this issue has increased in recent years (Boschert, 2012). Also in 2012, a chilling homemade video by a girl named Amanda Todd, who took her own life after suffering from severe relational and cyber aggression, went viral on the Internet. While discussions about bullying and cyber bullying are becoming more widespread, very few conversations in popular culture are broadening their scope to address an equally serious issue, *relational aggression*. Relational aggression is a kind of covert social aggression or covert form of "bullying" most common in adolescent girls (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011; Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2010), although recent work has argued this can be connected to male adolescents more recently. According to Dellasega and Nixon (2003), relational aggression is a psychological term that signifies the use of relationships to hurt peers. In their definition of relational aggression, Cheryl Dellasega and Cherisse Nixon (2003) stated:

> Compared to other forms of aggression, such as physical violence, RA is quieter, more insidious, and harder to detect. It encompasses starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl,

and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women), and like most behaviors, it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme. (p. 9)

Relational aggression is an acute issue because it is so pervasive (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003), is difficult to identify and address (Brown, 2003), and has significant long- and short-term effects for adolescents targeted by aggressive acts (Young et al., 2010). However, throughout modern history, relational aggression and the seriousness of relational aggression have been minimized, perhaps because it has been almost exclusively attributed to young women (Brown, 2003), which has resulted in a lack of educational programs and initiatives to address this pervasive problem.

Educators must be more attentive in understanding how adolescents (particularly girls) are experiencing relational aggression, asking central questions to address the issue and becoming fully cognizant that the problem is of deep personal concern to them, particularly in middle school (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011). In my own work with middle school children, as well as my lived experience, the middle school years are particularly challenging, both socially and emotionally. During this time, adolescents' self-concept is a construct that takes place largely outside of themselves (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Mead, 1934), and they look to friends and others for information about who they are, what they are good at, and whether they are liked or disliked. It is not uncommon for middle school students, particularly girls, to look to the same people who continually put them down for validation (Simmons, 2011). The vulnerability of this age combined with the increased freedom to interact with peers out from under the watchful eye of teachers and parents creates a perfect environment for

bullying, cyberbullying, and relational aggression to thrive, allowing it to become a part of middle school students' realities.

School administrators, teachers, and parents must cease the practice of casually dismissing relational aggression as an inevitable consequence of adolescent girlhood. Mentors of adolescent girls must begin to approach relational aggression as a problem worthy of intervention and, as such, adopt educational programs that seek to minimize its pervasiveness among adolescent girls. Adults and mentors who care about these girls must begin to search for solutions to a problem that is deeply rooted in a patriarchal society that allocates less power to girls than it does to their male counterparts. Providing opportunities for girls to develop more authentic friendships based on mutual respect and deep caring, and to cultivate a desire to challenge the social mores they find unacceptable will create a powerful generation of unified, powerful young women that this society desperately needs.

This study engaged both postmodern feminist theory and critical pedagogy as a means to deconstruct the issue of relational aggression among adolescent girls. The study was a qualitative, participatory action research design involving 17 seventh-grade girls who participated in a 10-week program curriculum. The program selected for this study was designed to engage girls with critical issues in contemporary society, the topic of adolescent female relationships, and ultimately to provide tools for girls in the program to develop less negative and more supportive relationships among participants. The study was conducted from April to June 2013. All group sessions were audio recorded, manually transcribed, and hand-coded. The data presented in the findings of this study are recorded testimony and group conversations that bring participants' experiences with

relational aggression to life while also making a compelling call to act for educators who wish to work toward more socially just educational opportunities for adolescent girls.

Statement of the Problem

Relational aggression is a widespread issue among adolescent girls, with some serious long- and short-term effects, including social withdrawal, depression, loneliness, anxiety, antisocial behavior, ideation of suicide, self-harm, low self-esteem, lack of feeling connected, absences from school, and lower academic achievement (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Young et al., 2010). When these effects are taken into consideration, it becomes abundantly clear that addressing relational aggression is an issue of equity in education. Girls who are victimized by relationally aggressive acts feel victimized and vulnerable, thwarting their ability to reach their full academic potential in school. This study was designed to contribute to the growing body of research, and promote the development of more robust preventative approaches and support systems for adolescent girls, for whom relational aggression is a real and serious issue, deeply personal to them.

Generalized notions of femininity, the covert nature of relational aggression, society's propensity to minimize the problem, and the lack of programs designed to decrease relational aggression create a social context where relational aggression is both pervasive and difficult to address (see Mann, 2994; Simmons, 2011). American society has deeply embedded traditional views of masculinity and femininity that dictate to girls how they ought to think, act, and feel (Mann, 1994; Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Traditional rules of femininity tell girls they should be gentle, kind, and relationship oriented (Brown, 2003; Mann, 1994; Sadker et al., 2009). These ideals are conditioned and reinforced from the day a child is born. According to Mann (1994), the first question

asked about a child is his or her gender; and once that is known, adults are more likely to refer to a baby girl as cute, small, and gentle, whereas they refer to a baby boy as active, big, and strong. Discrepancies in how male and female children are treated are also apparent in the children's clothing, the toys they are given, the games they are taught to play, and how we teach them to interact with their peers (Mann, 1994). Girls are encouraged to play dress up, care for baby dolls, and use language to resolve conflicts. Of course there are exceptions to these generalizations, as each child is distinctly different and unique in his or her own way. However, one only need visit an American preschool or watch network television to see that normative gender roles are pervasive and begin to take root in children at a very early age (Brown, 2003; Mann, 1994).

A heavy emphasis on relationships and interpersonal skills in girls are reinforced from an early age (Mann, 1994); and as such, it is no surprise that the ways girls act out aggressively toward one another are negotiated by socially constructed feminine values as well (Brown, 2003). Throughout their lives, there is a heavy emphasis placed on girls' relational and communication skills (Mann, 1994) and at all ages, girls (and women) are more oriented toward outward connection with others (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). During early adolescence, peer relationships and friendships become paramount as relationships with their parents become less so. Accordingly, acceptance from their same-sex peers becomes a great concern for girls (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Girls are more prone than boys to engage in acts of relational aggression as a consequence (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mann, 1994).

Girls are taught to communicate thoughtfully, to use their words to resolve conflicts, and they are discouraged from fighting and acting overtly aggressive (Mann,

1994). Girls construct their personal identity through their relationships with others, and at all ages, women are more oriented toward outward connection with others than boys of the same age (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). When adolescent girls engage in acts of relational aggression, they use these relationships as leverage (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mann, 1994). Accordingly, they are prone to exclude, gossip about, or ignore one another (Young et al., 2010). Their aggressive actions take this form because this is the way society has instructed girls they ought to behave toward one another (Brown, 2003). In the past five years (2005–2010), there have been a variety of efforts to challenge traditional gender stereotypes about women that designate girls as "bossy" instead of "powerful" and "catty" instead of "determined." One social media movement is called *Ban Bossy*, a collaborative effort by Sheryl Sandberg (author of *Lean In*, 2013), Rachel Simmons (cited in this work), and the Girl Scouts of America to promote awareness of the negative implications such messages have on girls. It is clear that there is still a great deal that can be achieved as a society on this front.

Because of the subtle ways that relational aggression manifests, this phenomenon can be incredibly difficult to address from an educational or parenting standpoint. Relationally aggressive girls are typically aware of their transgressions, while the targets are even more painfully aware of the way actions of aggressors make them feel (Brown, 2003). However, adolescent females acting as aggressors are highly skilled at not being caught when an act of relational aggression takes place; and if they are caught for some reason, it is difficult for the adult to punish the perpetrator because their behavior is difficult to classify as aggression, even if the intention behind the subtle action is perceived as aggressive (Mayo, 2009; Simmons, 2011). The way relational aggression

manifests poses difficulties from a school and administrative standpoint. According to Cris Mayo (2009), it is impossible to punish the intention behind an action, so acts of relational aggression frequently go unaddressed.

Because of the subtle and relational manifestations of relational aggression, there is a propensity to minimize the seriousness of the issue (Brown, 2003). Effects of relational aggression can range from momentary discomfort to serious long-term depression or even suicide attempts,[1] depending on the child involved (Young et al., 2010). A wide array of qualitative inquiries designed to look at how girls experiencing relational aggression (particularly Lyn Mikel Brown's 2003 research) speak to the seriousness of relational aggression, even though media systematically ignores or belittles the issue. Acts of relational aggression are both normalized and glamorized by contemporary media (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2011). Movies like *Mean Girls*, and television shows like *Gossip Girl* reinforce a variety of negative stereotypes about femininity. Despite the fact that these works were largely conceptualized to be satirical in nature, they blatantly reinforce adversarial views of female relationships and unintentionally glamorize relational aggression. The program used in this research incorporates lessons in which girls are encouraged to look critically at media messages like these and the negative perceptions of women and girls they reinforce.

Another challenge with relational aggression in adolescent girls is the context in which it occurs; it occurs usually between and among girls who know one another (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Most of the perpetrators and victims will even

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[1] For the most recent data on the impact of bullying, see http://www.bullyingstatistics.org /content/bullying-and-suicide.html

identify as close friends (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2011). In my work with adolescent girls, my students have expressed exasperation at the fact that those who are most mean to them sometimes are their dearest friends. Girls who are not friends with one another do not frequently engage in acts of relational aggression (this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2).

In my work as an educator, I have frequently had students report that they have been the target of an act of relational aggression when an adversary has used a perceived close friend's email address, cell phone, or social media account to send a hurtful message. The digital age has added another level of complexity to relational aggression due to the perceived anonymity and increased autonomy with which teens use technology to connect with one another. Whereas it used to take place only during school hours, relational aggression can now follow a girl home, into the safety of her own bedroom. Middle school girls have fewer opportunities than before to free themselves from the reach of an aggressive peer or, as Simmons (2011) calls them, "fremenies."

All of these aforementioned factors create a social condition where relational aggression is an increasingly serious issue, and there is presently a lack of educational programs designed to address relational aggression in a proactive manner (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mann, 1994). Schools experience difficulty in addressing relational aggression retroactively because of subtle manifestations (Mayo, 2009). The additional layer of complexity that electronically mediated communication adds both inside and outside of school, creates another daunting challenge for educators, administrators, and parents.

All this suggests that educators for social justice, committed to providing safe spaces for students, must implement programs designed to proactively address relational aggression and decrease the prevalence among adolescent girls. Because persistent societal, interpersonal, and media messages reinforce behaviors of relational aggression, a program designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls must encourage girls to look more critically at the messages they receive. The goal of this study was to promote the creation of spaces for critical inquiry within a classroom context designated to allow girls to think and dialogue consistently about issues deeply personal to them in ways that allow them to become empowered, by cultivating a new, more critical view of the world around them. This study postulated that if they were given the opportunity, and if they were engaged as a part of the solution rather than identified as the problem, girls would be able to develop greater critical consciousness about relational aggression and its impact upon their lives.

Relational Aggression as Lived Experience

The motivation to investigate this topic was situated in personal experience. As a middle school girl attending a small Catholic K–8 school in Los Angeles, the other girls in my class treated me horribly. Similar to the way relational aggression is described above, the ways this aggression manifested was often difficult for my teachers to observe and therefore intervene. It was also difficult for me to articulate the problem to my teachers when they would ask me what was wrong. Relational aggression takes place most frequently among girls who know each other and are even close friends (this is discussed at greater length in Chapter 2 of this study).

As such, both the ways in which my friends were mean to me and the fact that I considered the girls who acted most aggressively to me my friends was always problematic and confusing. At the time, acts of relational aggression had horrible short- and long-term effects on my confidence, my performance in school, my participation in extracurricular activities, and my ability to trust in peer relationships. My teachers and my parents tried to no avail to help me put the issue into perspective, saying things like, "They're just jealous," or "This is a hard time for all girls your age." However, their comments never helped to make the abusive behavior stop nor did they help me develop the tools to assert myself, to think critically about the situation I was in, or to cultivate self-confidence—which is all I wanted or needed at the time.

As an educator, seven years of middle school teaching (some of which has been in all-female institutions) have provided me invaluable insight into the lives of adolescent girls and how they relate to one another. There have been moments where I have been deeply moved by how loving and supportive middle school girls can be, while other moments the same girls have acted so viciously to one another that it shocked me. As an educator, I have frequently witnessed relationally aggressive acts and have seen, first hand, that not much has changed since my own adolescent years in the ways young girls continue to act toward one another. Many other educators I have worked with have also experienced frustration with the "grey area" in which acts of relational aggression most frequently occur, creating a situation where responses can be both difficult and inconsistent. This is closely connected to the conclusions of a recent study conducted by the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention that

asserted, “In recent years, schools and communities have experienced a rise in aggression, delinquency, and bullying among girls and young women” (2011, para.1).

The current research on relational aggression speaks to the root of the problem and its manifestations. Many studies have made recommendations for educational programs designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls, giving girls strategies to avoid being the target or the perpetrator of relational aggression. Knowing that this work exists and seeing how it could be beneficial to my own students, has made it frustrating and disheartening to not see the widespread implementation of programs designed to decrease relational aggression. Relational aggression still persists as fiercely as it has before, resulting in the same negative impact on the adolescent girls with whom I have worked closely with and cared deeply about.

As a teacher committed to creating a safe and supportive classroom environment for all of my students, I have intervened whenever I have seen an act of relational aggression taking place. However, because of its subtle nature, I have been more likely to hear about an act after the fact. Over the years, my students have confided in me personal stories of exclusion, jealousy, manipulation, gossip, and cyberbullying, which have left them feeling both hurt and powerless. Although I have always been committed to helping them however I can, I have encountered colleagues who discount relationally aggressive acts as a necessary rite of passage for adolescent girls. One female teacher even suggested just waiting for them to “grow out of it.”

Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) argued that this systematic minimizing of the seriousness of relational aggression does a great disservice to middle school girls. A female student once remarked to me, “You’re aware and you know what’s going on, so

obviously you say something about it. It stops. But other teachers, they don't know, and it just keeps happening." Educators committed to social justice have a responsibility to take the relational aggression of adolescent girls more seriously and seek ways to help girls foster healthier peer relationships with one another. The curriculum program employed for this study seeks to support that growth, and help middle school girls by finding their own voices and empowering their social agency through telling their own stories about the complexities of navigating girl culture.

Purpose of the Study

Relational aggression is considered a type of covert bullying most commonly found among adolescent girls, yet difficult to address because of the subtle ways this form of aggression manifests (Young et al., 2010). This study will use the definition of relational aggression (RA) offered by Dellasega and Nixon (2003), in that it best describes the context in which relational aggression most frequently occurs among girls:

> Compared to other forms of aggression, such as physical violence, RA is quieter, more insidious, and harder to detect. It encompasses starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl, and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women), and like most behaviors, it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme. (p. 9)

As a typology, relational aggression bears similarities to the definition of *microaggressions* posited by Derald Wing Sue (2010), because it encompasses subtle acts of aggression, exclusion, manipulation, or invalidation, which can be either intentional or unintentional and are hurtful to the target. An appreciation for Sue's work on gender microaggressions (2010) has played a role in forming the foundation for this work. The

purpose of this study was to select the best curriculum program available and test its impact on middle school girls' awareness and critical consciousness of relational aggression. Ultimately, with this study, I hoped to gather data in order to advocate for the implementation of programs designed to develop critical consciousness about relational aggression in middle school girls on a wider scale than they are implemented currently, to ameliorate the pervasiveness of this social problem.

In this study, I selected, implemented, and examined the impact of a curriculum program designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls in conjunction with the school's existing wellness curriculum in gender-specific seventh-grade health classes. Throughout the study, I employed participatory action research methods to describe the impact of the program on the female middle school student participants.

Research Question

One central research question informed this research study: *In what ways does a curriculum designed to decrease relational aggression among middle school girls impact critical consciousness of relational aggression among the participants?* In this study, *relational aggression* was defined as *subtle acts of aggression, exclusion, manipulation, or invalidation, which can be either intentional or unintentional and are hurtful to the target; it encompasses starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl, and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women), and like most behaviors, it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme.* This definition drew heavily on the typology posited by Dellasega and Nixon (2003); additional components of the definition used in this study were derived from Derald Wing Sue's (2010) definition of *microaggressions.* Relational aggression is

a type of bullying behavior (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) and as it was discussed throughout the course of the study, it was further defined as something that happened face-to-face, indirectly, or asynchronously by communicating with a digital medium like social media or text messages. *Critical consciousness* was defined as the ways girls identified, spoke about, and expressed critical awareness of relational aggression in society, developing practices to address it in their lives in ways that are empowering and humanizing.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to cultivate more discussion about how schools could approach the issue of relational aggression through the use of a proactive character education model in conjunction with the schools' existing curriculum. According to Stanford McDonnell (2008):

> Every sector of our society is confronted by a crisis of character, most tragically among young people, all too many of whom are plagued with problems of a poor work ethic, drug abuse, sexual activity, violence, lying, cheating, stealing, and bullying. (p. 25)

Curricula that teach students compassion and deep caring for other individuals is something that is truly missing from our current educational system. Given that issues like relational aggression, cyberbullying, and other antisocial behaviors are so pervasive in our society, there is a clear and pressing need for educators concerned with the promotion of social justice to include character education programs (such as the program implemented here) into school programming.

The fallout of relational aggression in 2014 looks different than it did 20 years ago. The socioemotional signs of depression and psychological trauma from relational aggression are severe, and include depression, eating disorders, or even self-immolation (cutting), and in some rare cases, suicide. Relationally aggressive acts also more frequently carried out with the assistance of a digital device over text message and social media—interfaces adults monitor very infrequently (Pachtin & Hidunja, 2014). Moreover, it is not an issue that parents should exclusively be charged with addressing. Schools and educational institutions need to have critical conversations about what is really going on with our girls and how we can support their healthy social formation and empowerment. It falls within their pedagogical responsibilities and interests to do so.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The conceptual framework with which the topic of relational aggression in adolescent female relationships was explored in this study was informed by both the literature in gender studies and my lived experiences as an educator in single-sex schools serving adolescent girls. Postmodern (and in some aspects, critical) feminist theory and critical pedagogy were the two theoretical frameworks that formed the framework for this study on relational aggression. This research sought to build upon the two theories in an effort to make their connections to relational aggression more explicit. To that end, the research design and methods employed in this study were also informed and influenced by grounded theory. The intersection of these two underlying theoretical frames within feminist pedagogy is discussed briefly in Chapter 2.

Feminist Theory

A feminist lens was a crucial part of this research study and served as the primary lens informing the analysis. This lens influenced how the problem of relational aggression was theorized, impacted the design of the curriculum program this study evaluated, and shaped how I, as the researcher, evaluated the data I collected throughout the course of this study. *Critical feminism* considers the postmodern world, the hegemonic power and authority held by men, and the persistence of gendered acts of aggression (physical, verbal, and ideological) that still serve to subjugate women and secure male hegemony (Brown, 2003). The critical feminist perspective looks at contemporary constructs of gender in society and how femininity is still systematically devalued and minimized in a society that boasts "girl power" and a myth that women have more power than ever before in American society (Brown, 2003). The feminist perspective through which I theorized relational aggression in this study held relational aggression as an indirect residual effect of centuries of female subjugation, male hegemony, gendered microaggressions (Sue, 2010), persistent media messages (Brown, 2003), and deeply embedded societal values (Mann, 1994) that perpetuate a dominant/subordinate power dichotomy (Douglas, 2010).

A subtle and persistent hidden curriculum is entrenched in contemporary society, which teaches girls how they should live, act, and feel (Flanagan, 2012). Belief systems that systematically devalue women also reinforce the ways that adolescent girls act aggressively toward one another (Mann, 1994), which most commonly manifests as relational aggression (Simmons, 2011). A *critical feminist* view of relational aggression takes into consideration that relational aggression is a by-product of male hegemony in

society. To amplify the issue, women are still subjugated in society and femininity is still devalued in the United States (Douglas, 2010); thus, American society does not perceive relational aggression as a serious issue (Brown, 2003). This interpretation has directly resulted in a lack of programs and initiatives that recognize relational aggression among girls as a serious issue (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011). These beliefs have produced a society systematically minimizing the problem of relational aggression as a rite of passage that girls must endure (Brown, 2003; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011).

Twenty years of research that precedes the current study shows the importance of integrating a critical feminist lens with critical pedagogy to understand and seek to address relational aggression. As Brown suggests in her book *Girlfighting* (2003), male hegemonic societies have systematically devalued relational aggression (largely by exaggerating its feminine attributes) as a divide and rule tactic to secure the influence of the dominant group, pitting members of the oppressed group against one another (see Freire, 1970). Brown asserted (2003), "From a very young age and in uneven and varied ways, girls are introduced to a 'reality' that encourages them to distrust other girls and women and, in some cases, turns them against themselves and against one another" (p. 2). And, as such, the way society systematically minimizes aggression "serves a cultural purpose" (p. 6). From Brown's perspective, women will not stand up for themselves against a patriarchal society, if they are too busy fighting among themselves.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire (1970) was the founder of—and his contemporaries continue to be the most important contributors to—critical pedagogical thought. Freire would describe this phenomenon as a "divide and rule" tactic by dominant groups in society to pit

women against one another in order to maintain their hegemonic hold on society. For Freire (1970), the dominant group in society has a strategic interest in turning members of marginalized groups against one another, in order to gain and maintain power. In discussing curricular goals informed by critical pedagogical principles, Freire (1970) asserted that the educational context should provide an open space for inquiry where the oppressed are able to uncover the source of their oppression, become critically aware of the social conditions that perpetuate their oppression, and freely participate in dialogue about social change and action. Freire called this critical awareness *conscientization*, a critical consciousness of the world, which is redefined by those who have been systematically disenfranchised within it (see Freire, 1970; Weiler, 2009).

Because the design of this curriculum focused on providing adolescent girls with spaces for critical inquiry into the ways that power is negotiated within an unequally gendered world where media and society normalize these phenomena, the second theoretical lens that guided this study was *critical pedagogy* (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy plays a central role in problematizing the solution for decreasing relational aggression in adolescent girls. These ideologies were taken into account while I carefully surveyed and selected the curriculum program for this study. In order to honor the conceptual framework in the design, the curriculum needed to adhere to those tenets that critical pedagogy defines as central to educational praxis that is emancipatory in nature.

As an educator, I was not exposed to critical pedagogy until the first semester of my doctoral program, although I had completed a master of education degree founded in theories of social justice in Catholic education. I had no idea that the some of practices

that I was engaging in as a teacher were founded in critical pedagogy. Conversely, I was not fully aware of my complicit role in perpetuating systems of inequality through what Freire called the “banking model” of education (1971). I did identify with the school of Constructivist education and valued creating a more culturally reflexive curriculum when I worked in an inner-city school in downtown Long Beach. That said, I struggled to remain cognizant of my power as an educator and trying to create a democratic classroom (Dewey, 1938) persistently challenging the hidden curriculum in the school, which perpetuated hegemonic social order (Sadker et al., 2009). I was intentional about posing questions and creating moments where students could discuss issues of race, gender, and class inequities within society. Due to my exposure to this pedagogical theory, those values have become a part of a well-informed critical pedagogical praxis in my life as an educator.

Exposure to critical pedagogy informed my gradual recognition of relational aggression as a serious issue facing adolescent girls. Critical pedagogy also informed my desire to investigate and implement a program to address it. The program I sought to implement needed to honor this theoretical practice through the creation of dialogical spaces of inquiry and discussion to allow girls to come to a more critical understanding of relational aggression. It also informed my choice of research methods, in that a participatory action research approach provided me an opportunity to consistently reflect on my own role as teacher, program participant, and researcher throughout this journey of inquiry. Formed within the cross section of a critical feminist lens and critical pedagogical design, the program curriculum, *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) was implemented as a means to investigate the research question for this

study. This program was selected because it is designed to encourage girls to dialogue about issues of relational aggression, as they define it, through their own critical narratives and a guided process of inquiry.

Research Design and Methodology

This research study took place at a private, nonreligious, independent, coeducational K–12 school in Los Angeles. The *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) curriculum was evaluated in this study while it was implemented in conjunction with the existing student wellness program. The study was a qualitative study and employed participatory action research design. The study involved 17 seventh-grade girls who participated in a 10-week program, which met one time per week over a 16-week period. The *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) was selected because it was designed to engage girls with critical issues in contemporary society and the topic of adolescent female relationships, and ultimately provide tools for girls in the program to develop less negative and more supportive relationships among participants. The study was conducted from April to June 2013. All group sessions were audio recorded, manually transcribed, and hand-coded.

To assess the impact of the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) program on participants' development of critical consciousness, the primary qualitative methodology utilized was Participatory Action Research (PAR). The guiding theoretical frames for this study both advocate for the reformation of systems of oppression in contemporary culture and inform liberating change, so PAR was the most complementary choice of research methodologies for this study. In line with a PAR design, this study implemented a curriculum program (action), and recorded and evaluated the experiences

of participants (research) within that program. In this study, I was both the researcher and a participant in the process, as I simultaneously implemented the program and collected data about participants' experiences therein.

The implementation and assessment the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) program was conceptualized through a thorough review of the literature and years of experience working with adolescent girls in middle school. The action (or implementation of the program) in this study was intended as an emancipatory praxis to develop critical consciousness (see Freire 1970) about relational aggression in adolescent girls. To that end, the study honored both the critical pedagogical theory and the critical feminist theory that drive this research.

The research design of this study followed an inquiry-action-evaluation sequence. I collected data that assessed the impact of the strategy in question in order to provide recommendations grounded in the data collected to inform future action. Throughout the course of the program, I collected data in a variety of ways. At the beginning of each session, I planned the course from the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) program, and recorded them before the session began. The most important data were the voices of the participants themselves as they engaged in the research process, so the sessions were audio recorded, hand-transcribed, then hand-coded. I also recorded my own experiences in the form of field notes and participant reflections. The final component of data collected were participants' reflections and feedback in a variety of handwritten class assignments, which helped to inform the action that needs to take place in future implementation. Participant voices gave the data depth and provided an opportunity to more deeply understand the experiences of the girls as they participated in

the program. The culmination of this research is a chapter reflecting on the lessons learned in implementing this program along with recommendations for future program implementation, which I hope will be transferable to other school sites.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

As mentioned above, Participatory Action Research (PAR) was selected because of its consideration of power, reliability, and self-reflection, which were all central elements to this study. The major limitations of this study were my relationship to the student participants and the fact that I was employed at this school site. Additionally, I selected only one of the many curricula available, which I personally believed honored the conceptual frame behind this study. Finally, as in any classroom study, the dynamic was structured by an inherent power dimension between the students and myself, which all constitute factors that potentially influenced the outcome of this study. This curriculum program is accompanied by *The Facilitator's Guide to Becoming a Muse* (2009), which provided insight as to how I could minimize some of those seemingly inevitable limitations within the context of the classroom. This resource proved to be very helpful in moments in which I was challenged as the facilitator over the course of the study.

Limits to generalizability were another serious limitation of this study due to the fact that the research took place in only one school. So whether the data and recommendations are helpful to a greater population is something to be considered for anyone who wishes to use these conclusions and act upon them. However, the goal of this research was ultimately to share the findings and recommendations from this study so that other school sites can act on the findings and conclusions in a way that makes the

most sense to them. Although my positionality was a potential limitation of this study, I took time to careful articulate my biases and theoretical frameworks in order to be as forthcoming as I could about the perspectives that informed this work. This forthright recognition of positionality, as an educator and a researcher, was fully congruent with a perspective that joins critical pedagogy with feminist values.

The size of the group of students who participated in this study was another limitation of this research. The reason is that the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) program recommends having 8–12 girls in the group as a manageable number. It also recommended two facilitators, if they were available. In this study, I was restricted by some institutional needs and expectations that enrollment for classes should be open for students to chose to participate in extracurricular activities in their afternoon sessions. Although I felt concerned that this number would interfere with our ability to move through the curriculum program and give all the girls in the group time to share openly about each of the lessons, the number of girls more frequently added to the quality of discussions than not.

A major assumption that may have affected the collection and analysis of the data for this study was the idea that changes in students' *conscientization* of relational aggression would be observable and that I would be able to record these observations in my field notes. To address this question, student written reflections were used as a method to triangulate data and determine what changes took place, as defined by the students themselves.

Organization of the Dissertation

This first chapter provides a brief overview of the problem of relational aggression that the research seeks to address. Each subsequent chapter works to elaborate on each of the sections that appear in Chapter 1, and provide an expanded discussion of relational aggression and how educators can address relational aggression proactively. Chapter 2 provides a more comprehensive review of the literature to facilitate an understanding of the systemic causes for relational aggression, present contemporary considerations for relational aggression, and to elaborate upon the theoretical frames that informed this study. Chapter 3 outlines the research design's methodological underpinnings. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the study. Chapter 5 provides an analysis and discussion of the findings, while Chapter 6 provides conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Almost ten years ago, Nikki Crick and Jennifer Grotpeter (1995), drew upon the work of Feshback (as cited in Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) and wrote, “Although gender differences in the forms of aggression that children exhibit were postulated years ago, very little relevant research has yet been conducted” (p. 710) on the ways girls exhibit aggression relationally. However, much has changed in the past decade, and relational aggression is emerging as a term that people are becoming increasingly familiar with. Cheryl Dellasega and Cherisse Nixon (2003) have taken the idea that girls exhibit meanness and express conflict differently than boys, studying the causes and manifestations, and defining relational aggression more clearly:

> Relational aggression (RA), also referred to as female bullying, is the use of relationships, rather than fists, to hurt another. Rumors, name calling, cliques, shunning and a variety of other behaviors are weapons girls use against one another on an everyday basis in schools, sports, recreational activities, and even houses of worship. (p. 2)

In the past 20 years, literature on the topic of relational aggression in adolescent girls has gradually emerged, and more empirical research on the topic is being conducted in the field. This has resulted in an increase in societal awareness of this issue (Maccoby, 2003), although the literature has provided little insight into the reasons for this increase. One possibility regarding the proliferation of research associated with relational aggression in adolescent girls might be the increased willingness of academics, educators,

and psychologists to engage the issue of relational aggression as an important topic, deserving their attention. This increased awareness of relational aggression might also have been inspired by the fact that female aggression (of various types) is on the rise, and adolescent girls are becoming more aggressive and vicious than ever (Brown, 2003; National Institute of Mental Health, 2011; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1996; Susman & Pajer, 2003). Another factor may be that technology enables teens to connect with one another more and more via asynchronous media through social networking apps and text messaging (Pachtin & Hidunja, 2014; Simmons, 2011). Whether or not increased awareness of relational aggression has coincided with boys experiencing relational aggression has not been evaluated empirically at this point. Regardless of the cause of this increase in awareness of relational aggression, it is important because of the long- and short-term effects that it has on adolescent girls.

This review of the literature seeks to provide an overview of what the leading scholars in the field have said about relational aggression: the critical feminist perspective on relational aggression, definitions of relational aggression, the systemic causes for relational aggression, and its contemporary manifestations.

Relational Aggression *Vis á Vis* Critical Feminism

From a critical feminist perspective, relational aggression has been theorized as having a variety of systemic causes (Brown, 2003) rooted in a society where male hegemony is both pervasive and insidious (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Qin, 2004). These systemic causes and the socialization of women and girls in society have a close connection to relational aggression in young women. For generations, girls have been taught at an early

age how they ought to behave and act, and even how they should resolve conflicts, which continues to create a social climate in which relational aggression in adolescent girls is commonplace (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011; Susman & Pajer, 2003; Tanembaum, 2002; Underwood, 2003). Male hegemonic values in American society contribute to the ways girls are transitively "girled" and gender is "ritualistically repeated" (Butler, 1993). From a feminist perspective, three systemic causes have set the stage for relational aggression: (a) socialization of women in society, (b) dominant cultural expectations for women, and (c) women's unequal share of power in society (Crowley Jack, 2001 as cited in Tanembaum, 2002, p. 63). The sections below elaborate on these causes.

Systemic Roots for Relational Aggression

There are systemic causes that have created a social order in which women are subordinated to men, an idea that girls begin to internalize at an early age (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Qin, 2004). Such ideas are central to the upbringing of most girls and—through intentional and unintentional practices—are reinforced once girls begin to go to school (Mann, 1994; Sadker et al., 2009). According to some scholars, this experience is a major source of frustration for girls (Brown, 2003; Crowley Jack, 2001; Tanembaum, 2002). When girls internalize the message that they have less power than boys, they become so aggravated with this imbalance that they begin to fight with one another and put each other down in order to elevate themselves. This unfairness creates an environment in which, "from a very young age and in uneven and varied ways, girls are

introduced to a 'reality' that encourages them to distrust other girls and women and, in some cases, turns them against themselves and against one another" (Brown, 2003, p. 2). As a result, girls' relationships have been frequently characterized by competition, exclusion, and relationally aggressive acts, which become most pronounced in early adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011; Tanembaum, 2002; Underwood, 2003). While this increase is not necessarily true for all girls (cultural, racial, and class dimensions are discussed later), the adolescent years for many girls are characterized by some degree of conflict and disunity within their peer group (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011).

The discord that relational aggression creates among adolescent girls serves as a major concern from a critical feminist perspective (Brown, 2003). Freire (1970), the founder of critical pedagogy, has argued that any time members of an oppressed group in society are pitted against other members of the same group the effect is to "hinder the unifying action indispensable to liberation" (p. 173). According to Brown (2003), as society perpetuates ideologies that situate girls and women in less important power positions than boys and men, this sets the stage for what she calls *girlfighting* or relational aggression. The effect is that girls become pitted against one another, and the result is that they cannot rise against the societal pressures that serve to subjugate them. In other words, because girls have been conditioned by society to fight among themselves, they cannot unify to oppose the powers that subjugate them and limit their social agency (Brown, 2003).

Brown's perspective illustrates the reasons relational aggression ought to be examined from a critical feminist perspective—as both a direct byproduct of male hegemony and female subjugation (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Qin, 2004; Walters, 2005), and a means to perpetuate and maintain the existing hegemonic social order (Brown, 2003). This phenomenon, which Freire (1970) referred to as "divide and rule," is a complicated cycle of dominance and subordination, which is challenging to reverse. Gender stratification from a critical feminist perspective—the ways that society teaches gender (and associated behaviors), the inherent dimensions of asymmetrical power relations associated with learning gender, and acting in gender-specific ways within contemporary American society—must be examined thoroughly in order to understand the systemic causes for relational aggression.

Gender Socialization and Identity

Gender matters. Although many people continue to use the terms "gender" and "sex" interchangeably, a fundamental difference exists in that sex is biologically determined and gender is a social construction. However, the terms *sex* and *gender* are intimately related because how gender identity is developed and reinforced typically depends on one's biological sex (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949). Although there are many theories about the biological differences between sexes, scholars have widely accepted that gender (and gendered behavior) is a social construction (Crowley Jack, 2001; Mann, 1994; Tanembaum, 2002). Gender identity is learned at a very young age (Mann, 1994). Girls learn how they should speak, act, dress, and even how they should exhibit aggressive behavior in a gender-specific way in their interaction with others.

Socially acceptable behaviors associated with gender impact almost every aspect of young girls' lives, especially their relationship with others and how they manage conflict with their peers.

Gender from infancy. The sex of the child is the first thing friends and family members inquire about when he or she is born (Mann, 1994). When children are very young, they act in a way that is not gender- or sex-specific, but they quickly learn their gendered identity, as their parents and other people around them teach them how they should act according to their gender (Charon, 1995). After the sex of the child is known, adults are likely to default to treating him or her according to the binary gender constructs so pervasive in American society (Mann, 1994). The way infants are held, the adjectives used to describe their characteristics, and even the intonation of adults' voices when speaking to infants (Mann, 1994) contribute to the processes by which girls are what Butler (1993) has called "girled," and treated differently from a their first moments of life (Mann, 1994). According to critical feminist theory, gender socialization plays a major role in setting the stage for relational aggression in adolescent girls (Crowley Jack, 2001; Mann, 1994; Tanembaum, 2002).

Gender in the home. Feminist perspectives have asserted that things as basic as the family structure, toys, dress, and games that children play relegate girls to the lower rungs of society from an early age (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005). The family context contributes heavily to the socialization of young children and the development of gender identities (Mann, 1994). Girls learn how to be "girls" through the way that their parents speak to them, through the actions that take place in their home environments, and through the ways their parents urge them to act (de

Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). Girls even learn the gender-appropriate ways to play "as adults begin to distinguish through language which of these acts are male and which are female, children learn who they are and which types of behavior belongs to their identities" (Charon, 1995, p. 221).

As young girls grow, gender roles are reinforced through the toys they are encouraged to play with (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Mann, 1994). Praise and reprimands for engaging in behaviors associated with the appropriate gender during play are also common ways gender is reinforced (de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). These cultural expectations for how girls should act—even in informal settings—play a central role in their social development, wherein there are inherent dimensions of power. Ideal feminine behavior is embedded with myriad cultural messages that reinforce male superiority over women, from the way young girls are conditioned to speak and look to the ways they are told to think, act, and, ultimately, play (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005).

Mothers, fathers, siblings, and other family members (regardless of whether the family is a traditional nuclear family) teach gender to children from an early age. Fathers or patriarchs are typically more rigid in their beliefs about gender than mothers (Mann, 1994). As a consequence, fathers are more likely to correct a male child if he is playing "like a girl," than a female child engaging in masculine play behavior (Mann, 1994). This discrepancy teaches male children that acting "like a girl" is reprehensible, whereas acting like a boy is acceptable. Girls internalize that message as well. Covert

messages like this play a central role in reinforcing hegemonic values in society. These normalized attitudes and behaviors go hand in hand with how they exhibit aggression in adolescence.

Gendered identity. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), a girl is not born to act like a girl; she is taught how to be a girl. From the moment parents become aware that a child is "a girl" after her birth, the gender socialization process commences (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). Social interaction and cultural learning are processes whereby girls unknowingly internalize messages about power and authority within society (Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; Freire, 1970; Mead, 1934; Qin, 2004; Walters, 2005). Thereby, identity—*vis-à-vis* gender and the social values mores associated with that particular gender—becomes part of a child's individual identity from a young age.

George Herbert Mead (1934) wrote that the mind and notions of self are largely developed through symbolic interaction (or communication) within one's society and environment. Mead (1934) identified the self "as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and [it] arises in social experience" (p. 140). In other words, interaction within our environment helps humans develop their concept of self (Mead, 1934). It is through this process of socialization that girls learn how to be girls and boys learn how to be boys (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walters, 2005). Gender is often a central aspect in a child's individual identity or self-concept.

For decades, feminists have argued that through gender socialization, the systemic imbalance of gender and power continues to be internalized and replicated in American

society (Butler, 1993; Charon, 1995; Qin, 2004; Walters, 2005). According to Dongxiao Qin (2004), "From a critical feminist perspective, self is essentially constructed by power relations of groups of individuals within particular sociocultural and historical contexts" (p. 306). From this perspective, gender socialization is a covert process by which power becomes allocated and society becomes stratified. The way female children are socialized to conform to behaviors that are "feminine" in American culture is one of the major factors that has contributed to the pervasiveness of relational aggression in adolescent girls (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011; Susman & Pajer, 2003; Tanembaum, 2002; Underwood, 2003). The role of power in relational aggression is discussed further in subsequent sections.

Social interaction. The way girls learn to be "girls" in society influences their behavior and how they exhibit aggression (Mann, 1994). From an early age, girls are exposed to a subtle, persistent curriculum that teaches and reinforces their gendered place in the world (Flanagan, 2012). Social interaction is the way that gender is learned within a society, and it is also the means by which gender norms are reproduced and perpetuated. As Charon (1995) has stated, "The definition of who women are in the world may have originally arisen among men, or even between men and women, but over time that has influenced the views that women have of themselves" (p. 221).

Through their socialization, women and girls internalize gendered ways of interacting with the world; this also informs the way other people in society expect women and girls to act (Charon, 1995). Critical feminists have argued that social mores pertaining to femininity are considered oppressive and restrict women and girls (Butler,

1990, 1993; Crowley Jack, 2001; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Tanembaum, 2002; Walter, 2005). From a young age, girls learn that they must act in a demure and deferential manner, never acting in an overtly aggressive manner (Tanembaum, 2002). This idea that girls should never act with overt aggression goes hand in hand with how aggression is displayed in female relationships.

Reinforcing the Difference

Cultural expectations for girls impact all of their behaviors, including the ways that they act aggressively toward one another. Gendered attitudes, beliefs, and values are constructed and reinforced through direct and indirect interaction with others (Mead, 1949). Gender is also reproduced through mediums beyond interpersonal engagement. Two complicated forums where generalized notions of femininity are reinforced are schools and media. The impact of schools and media are easy to expose but difficult to address, because they are so pervasive and deeply interwoven into the American cultural fabric (Brown, 2003).

Learning gender in schools. As children begin to attend school, gender is reinforced through the hidden curricula and their interaction with friends and teachers (Mann, 1994). The *hidden curriculum* refers to classroom values and learning outcomes that are not openly acknowledged by teachers or learners (McLaren, 2002) or are unintentional consequences of education. Examples of the hidden curricula are present when a teacher asks a "strong" male student to move a desk, or tells a "caring" female student to look after the classroom pet or plant. Other examples are less intentional. For instance, a teacher might reward boys for exhibiting outgoing behavior in class but scold girls for acting the same way. From a critical perspective, the hidden curriculum serves

as a means to perpetuate social inequalities that contribute to the stratification of society (McLaren, 2002; Sadker et al., 2009). By way of the hidden curricula, cultural values of the dominant group are reproduced through consensual practices—an inevitable consequence (albeit unintentional) of formal education (McLaren, 2002). The impact of the hidden curriculum on girls is that they are taught to internalize a subordinate position in society. According to Mann (1994), "Some classroom sexism is subtle, but it is constant and pervasive. Some of it is blatant, so ruthlessly destructive to our daughter's ambitions, that it ought to be indicted as malicious and wounding" (p. 79).

According to Mann (1994), the interpersonal dynamics that take place within schools are damaging to girls. Girls enter school willing and excited to learn, with an aptitude measurably higher than boys of the same age. From birth, girls are ahead of boys in cognitive development, are generally more mature, and in the early primary grades, outscore boys on standardized tests (Mann, 1994). By high school, however, the tables turn. When girls graduate from high school, their test scores are lower and their loss of self-esteem is far more profound than boys (Mann, 1994, p. 11). From a social justice perspective, the fact that educational experiences have a regressive impact on young women must be examined with the same critical lens that looks at discrepancies in the outcomes of minority and at-risk students.

Gendered media messages. While schools play an important role in the reproduction of gender dichotomies, media may have the greatest impact on reproducing gender in society because of its virtually limitless bounds and increasingly less censored content. As a result, any discussion of the systemic causes whereby girls are "girled" (Butler, 1993) must address the impact media has on the socialization of young girls

(Brown, 2003; Butler, 1993; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994). Media messages subtly undermine the signals well-intending adults give girls about the respect and dignity they deserve. We are so "connected" as a society that it is impossible to escape these ubiquitous images. Media messages serve as a subtle, persistent gendered curriculum that shapes girls' ideas about themselves. Some are much more overt, such the costumes and performances by Miley Cyrus during the 2014 *Video Music Awards* and Beyoncé at the 2014 *Grammys* and reality shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians, The Real Housewives of Atlanta,* and *Toddlers in Tiaras*. Throughout adolescence, girls develop a complicated relationship between the media they turn to for entertainment and the extraordinary pressure to conform to the ideals reinforced therein.

Adolescent girls experience omnipresent pressure to be thin, pretty, and popular. Messages that girls must dress, speak, and act in particular ways are transmitted through the media that girls both actively and passively consume (Brown, 2010; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011). Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable because they have not developed the ability to critically analyze and interpret the images that they encounter in the media, which tend to reinforce negative stereotypes of women and femininity. Brown (2003) has argued that until girls are taught to develop the skills necessary to identify the sources of their subordination within society—or at least be cognizant of the impossible ideals reinforced on a daily basis—girls will continue to be frustrated with their place in society and take that out on one another. As a result, future programs designed to target the issue of relational aggression in adolescent girls must engage media as an important societal factor of which girls must develop heightened critical awareness.

Even media as seemingly innocent as Disney movies has indoctrinated young girls with pervasive and binary views of gender and femininity for generations (Brown, 2003; Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Movies and television designed to target even the youngest children are filled with messages about "negotiating heterosexuality and romance in ways that subordinate, objectify, or denigrate girls and pit them against one another" (Brown, 2003, p. 21). Through their consistent interaction with media, girls have been taught about the importance of their physical appearance and the need to be found desirable and attractive to men and boys (Brown, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Heteronormativity and competition with other women are central tenets of the gender socialization of young women in American society.

Movies like *Mean Girls* and reality television shows have taught girls they are justified in distrusting one another and that deceit among girls is both commonplace and normal (Brown, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011). On the Internet, girls lie about their ages to appear older (Simmons, 2011) and are exposed to harmful ideas like the commonplace that girls their age engage in self-cutting or eating disorders, which are normalized and glamorized (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011). Magazines like *Glamour* and *Seventeen* have continued to teach girls that being sexually active at an early age and dressing well will land them the favor of their male love interests (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011). The average adolescent girl lacks the critical capacity and maturity to navigate these messages and their harmful effects.

In addition to sending negative messages about the lives of adolescent girls, movies, television shows, magazines, newspapers, radio, advertisements, and other forms of media consistently reinforce traditional gender dichotomies that can create problematic

power imbalances between boys and girls (Brown, 2003). The fact that young boys also interact with these media messages reinforces their role as the object of girls' affection and affirms their ability to observe girls' bodies, comment on their looks, and act as the dominant member in their heterosexual relationships with girls. Frequent acts of sexual harassment against adolescent girls are one of the means by which adolescent girls have been subjugated and put in their place by boys (Mann, 1994). The experiences of the young women in this study with sexual harassment are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Contemporary media consistently reinforces negative messages about women and girls, and paints a picture of a reality that normalizes adversarial relationships between them (Brown, 2003). Girls also continue to receive mixed messages; first, that they should be pretty, nice, and soft-spoken, and, second, that they should distrust and act with hostility toward one another (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011). Both of these issues play a central role in relational aggression during adolescence.

Gender and Power in Society

Gender socialization and cultural expectations play a huge role in the formation of identity for girls and their relationships with one another; the disproportionate power allocated to girls in society is an additional factor that contributes to relational aggression in adolescent girls (Brown, 2003; Crowley Jack, 2001; Tanembaum, 2002). In the contemporary social context, the imbalance of power between girls and boys is consistently reinforced in society. From a very early age, children internalize the stratified social system whereby girls "naturally" have less power than boys (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Mead, 1934).

Doing something “like a girl” is an insult between young boys on many American playgrounds. According to Brown (2003), girls in society become downright frustrated about these factors; and the way that they carry out aggressive acts toward one another—relationally—is a direct byproduct of coping with the inequalities present in their gendered upbringing (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2011; Underwood, 2003).

Female “passivity.” Throughout childhood, girls learn that it is important to act in a manner that is more reserved than their male counterparts; boys are encouraged to be both outgoing and adventurous (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005). In 1949, de Beauvoir wrote about the discrepancies between what boys are encouraged to do and what girls are allowed to do:

> For one thing, they suffer under the rule forbidding them to climb trees and ladders or on roofs. Adler remarks that the notions of high and low have great importance, the idea of elevation and space implying spiritual superiority, as may be seen in various heroic myths; to attain a summit, a peak, is to stand out beyond the common world of fact s a sovereign subject (ego); among boys, climbing is frequently a basis for challenge. The little girl, to whom such exploits are forbidden and who, seated at the floor of a tree or cliff, sees the triumphant boys high above her, must feel that she is, body and soul, their inferior. (p. 301)

The metaphor of climbing trees may seem less relevant today; yet, in the modern world, girls are still taught to be acquiescent and obedient, and boys are taught to be enterprising and adventurous and far less power is relegated to girls than to boys (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). Boys are the actors, whereas girls are the recipients of

action (Brown, 2003; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). Passive-aggressive behaviors are a major characteristic of relational aggression in adolescent girls, and they are learned through dominant cultural messages about how girls should act.

Male hegemony. Moya Lloyd (2007) has argued:

> The notion of the sex/gender system thus establishes the idea that male and female genders are not only different; under what came to be called "patriarchy" they are hierarchically structured in such a way that the masculine is privileged over the feminine. (p. 29)

This binary has created the hierarchical (or hegemonic) structure whereby women and men have been allocated different power and authority within society and where both become indoctrinated to follow their specific roles, often unknowingly (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2002). According to McLaren (2002), "Hegemony is a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression" (p. 67).

Many critics of modern critical feminism continue to argue that women have successfully achieved equality to men. Some even argue that the liberation of women is directly related to the decline of moral society; but the reality is that women still do not enjoy equal access or equal opportunity (Douglas, 2010). Still, the United States is one of the few industrialized societies that has yet to elect a female head of state. Meanwhile, women worldwide still make 17% less than men for the same work (Biggs, 2011). In the United States, women make 77 cents on the dollar compared to men's earnings, and 14.6% of women live in poverty, compared to 10.9% of men (National Women's Law Center, 2012). As of 2012, women in the United States make up the majority of the

population living at or below the poverty line, and 40% of households headed by women live in poverty (National Women's Law Center, 2012). For Brown (2003), female subordination in society is a major root cause for girls' frustration and the ways they manifest aggression toward one another.

Subjugation and aggression. Pervasive gender dichotomies that assign women as the weaker, inferior sex are so deeply embedded in our society that many women have become unknowing participants in accepting and reproducing these generalized themes of femininity (Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Freire, 1970; Mann, 1994). Those generalized themes of femininity have created limited constructs for femininity, which do not take into account the complex reality of women's lives in the 21st century (Brown, 2003). These themes include ideas that women should embody submissiveness, be nurturing, and strive to be sexually attractive and available to men (Butler, 1990, 1993). As a result, women and girls "are introduced to a 'reality' that encourages them to distrust other girls and women, and in some cases, turns them against themselves and another" (Brown, 2003, p. 2). Brown (2003) has demonstrated a strong feminist stance on the systemic causes for girls' subjugation *vis á vis* relational aggression in society:

> Fundamentally, it's a political story about battling the surveillance and control of girls' bodies, minds, and spirits, a story that varies with social context, with race, class, and sexual orientation. It's a story about containment and dismissal that gets acted out by girls on other girls because this is the safest and easiest outlet for girls' outrage and frustration. It's a story about who gets taken seriously and listened to; a story about rage at the machine channeled through relationships and performed in the everyday spaces that girls occupy. And it's a story about justified

> anger at a world that devalues girls and encourages them to distance and disinfect themselves from all things feminine. (p. 2)

These assertions resonate heavily with critical feminist discourse and speak to why relational aggression is pervasive in a society where women are systematically subjugated by male hegemony. Brown's well-researched and critical stance on women's position in society was the primary reason her curriculum, *From Adversaries to Allies,* was selected as the curriculum program for this research study.

Defining Relational Aggression

The notion that girls have a unique way of acting aggressively toward one another, and the way they use relationships as leverage in conflict became prominent through the critical work of Nikki Crick (1995). Crick is renowned for revolutionizing the field of relational aggression, and no recent work in the field has been written without citing her groundbreaking research (McEnroe, 2012). Ten years ago, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) hypothesized that girls:

> Focus on relational issues and would include behaviors that are intended to significantly damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group (e.g., angrily retaliating against a child by excluding her from one's play group; purposefully withdrawing friendship or acceptance in order to hurt or control the child; spreading rumors about the child so that peers will reject her). (p. 711).

Their research and the findings of many subsequent studies have found this hypothesis to be grounded in theory. In the past 20 years, the existence of female aggression has become more widely accepted as a phenomenon worth studying, and many scholars

postulate that every adolescent girl (whether a perpetrator, target, or bystander) will witness acts of relational aggression during their adolescent years (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

Many authors have built on Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) early work and have moved toward more concrete ways of defining relational aggression. Young et al. (2010) have postulated:

> Relational aggression is manipulative or subtle, not concrete, was once viewed as an integral part of the socialization process, but is now being viewed with more concern, although schools lack the means to intervene in relational aggression and prevent it. (p. 14)

Moreover, the definition (noted earlier) that has been offered by Dellasega and Nixon (2003) most clearly speaks to the complex nature of relational aggression:

> Relational aggression is a psychological term that signifies the use of relationships to hurt peers. Compared to other forms of aggression, such as physical violence, RA is quieter, more insidious, and harder to detect. It encompasses starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl, and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women), and like most behaviors, it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme. (p. 9)

Brown (2003) has referred to female relational aggression as *girlfighting*. She has continued to spend a great deal of time developing the case that media socialize us to believe that women are mean, nasty, and catty; Brown has argued that these ideas are a "setup" for girlfighting (2003, p. 8). Brown has been heavily influenced by postmodern

feminist discourse and argues that girls and women become angry because society systematically devalues and objectifies them. The manifestations are similar to those identified by other researchers, where girlfighting is thought to occur when "girls and women derogate and judge and reject other women for the same reasons they fear being derogated and judged and rejected" (Brown, 2003, p. 32).

Developmental considerations also play a role in relational aggression, and speak to why relational aggression becomes pronounced during adolescence (Young et al., 2010). Smaller children lack the communication skills necessary to carry out acts of relational aggression because their interpersonal skills are simply not sophisticated enough. As they get older, their capacity for meanness and relational aggression becomes more sophisticated and harder to detect, and aggressors have a better understanding of how to target victims and achieve their goals (Young et al., 2010).

Middle School Culture and Relational Aggression

Middle school is a particularly difficult time, and most adults need only draw upon their own experiences in middle school to believe that to be true. Understanding this fact is central to understanding of middle school culture from a biological, psychological, and social standpoint. This section will briefly discuss each of these components to begin to explain why middle school is such a challenging time. In so doing, the hope is to explain why relational aggression tends to be so pervasive in adolescence.

Biological

Middle school is difficult for girls because they typically reach puberty earlier than boys, which means that they are dealing with the trauma of two transitions during

seventh and eighth grade—one physical and one biological (Akos & Galassi, 2004). A 1996 study determined that girls who reach puberty early (around or before the middle school years) experienced a greater risk for emotional issues and social isolation, and were more vulnerable to having negative interaction with their fathers (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 1996). Thus, the fact that puberty and middle school frequently coincide means that middle school can be particularly challenging for girls.

Psychological

Physiological and psychological development in adolescence go hand in hand. When children enter middle school and are going through puberty, this makes them more prone to suffer from depression (Petersen, Sarigiani, & Kennedy, 1991). According to a study by Ge et al. (1996), when girls entered puberty around middle school, they were more likely to engage in new behaviors, many of which they were not psychologically prepared for, which resulted in increased risk of psychological distress. This study asserted that girls are more likely to suffer from emotional distress, are more likely to identify with riskier peer groups, and are less likely to feel connected to their male parents at home. From a psychological standpoint, middle school is a difficult time for girls, which likely makes them vulnerable to relational aggression and its effects.

Social

According to a 2003 study (Anderman), middle school students' sense of belonging at school declined gradually over time, which had negative academic and social effects on students. This study found that when teachers implemented strategies to teach mutual respect between students, the effect was ameliorated. According to Akos and Galassi (2004), middle school may be particularly difficult for girls because they

"experience more peer upheaval or that they experience more distress than do boys because of the greater salience of their peer networks" (p. 102). Girls also look to their friends more so than boys do to develop their sense of identity, worth, self-esteem and belonging in middle school (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Middle school is a fundamental milestone in social development. All of these biological, psychological, and social factors impact the middle school environment and amplify the other social conditions that make girls are more susceptible to relational aggression and its negative long- and short-term effects during this time.

Contemporary Manifestations of Relational Aggression

Rigid notions of appropriate masculine and feminine behavior inform the way that boys and girls interact on a daily basis, and also govern the way adolescents act aggressively toward one another. Most scholars who have focused on relational aggression have pointed to the differences in how girls and boys are socialized, which have impacted the ways aggression manifests differently in boys and girls. Relationships are heavily emphasized in the development and socialization of young girls (Brown, 2003; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994). Additionally, girls are typically discouraged from acting aggressively (although differences may be present among varying racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, discussed later); overall, anger and aggression are discouraged in girls from childhood (Campbell, 1993).

Relational Aggression and Friendships

Adolescent girls place an incredibly high value on their friendships. As Terri Pater and Ruthellen Josselson (1998) have written , "Our choice of friends -- and who

chooses us -- helps to mark out our place in the social world and give us a reading on who we ourselves are" (p. 27). So complicated are the lives of girls that their best friends can be (and, as some have argued, most frequently are) their worst enemies (see Simmons, 2011). A unique aspect of relational aggression is the propensity for girls to exhibit mean behaviors to girls they identify as their closest friends (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006). In the complicated world of adolescent girl culture, the desire to be accepted can sometimes override the desire to be respected, even by their closest friends (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011). The rules for relational aggression, to the same end, are quite complicated.

The traditional socialization of adolescent girls in the United States and other westernized countries emphasizes relationships and discourages overt aggression. These binary values come together in a problematic fashion when relational aggression is examined. Whereas boys are taught that it is appropriate to act physically aggressive, girls are taught to suppress aggression and deal with conflict differently (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994). Girls are taught to employ language, communication, and other relationship-oriented strategies to resolve conflict (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994). Boys are given an entirely different message—it is socially acceptable to act aggressively toward one another and fight physically with peers (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Mann, 1994). As a result, two distinct ways for acting aggressively have emerged: boys' aggression as predominantly *instrumental* (utilized to take control) and girls' aggression as typically *expressive* (a reaction to the feeling of loss of control).

Anne Campbell (1993) has argued, "In men's accounts of aggression, we are told what it is like to take control, in women's accounts we hear about what it means to lose control" (p. 2). According to Tanembaum (2002), "Girls and women internalize the idea that being aggressive is acceptable only for men, so we direct our aggression underground" (p. 171). Campbell (1993) has elaborated, "Women's aggression emerges from their inability to check the disruptive and frightening force of their own anger" (p. 1). As a result of their socialization, female aggression manifests relationally, usually described as social aggression (Underwood, 2003), relational aggression (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2005; Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011), or indirect aggression (Crowley Jack, 2001; Tanembaum, 2002). For girls, the means of exhibiting aggression manifests relationally can have serious short- and long-term consequences on girls' socioemotional health (Young et al., 2010).

Subcategories within Relational Aggression

Young et al. (2010) have worked toward developing a stronger typology for relational aggression. They stated that the major aspect of relational aggression—that it is manipulative or subtle and not concrete—was once viewed as an integral part of the socialization process. Their work has subdivided relational aggression into two categories: *reactive relational aggression* and *instrumental relational aggression*. *Reactive relational aggression* occurs when aggressors are provoked or feel threatened, manipulated, and angry, such as when someone retaliates because of a mean email to or about someone (Young, et al., 2010). *Instrumental relational aggression* occurs when aggressors use relationships as leverage or manipulation to get what they want (Young et

al., 2010). Although relational aggression is being viewed with more concern today, schools lack the means to intervene in relational aggression and prevent it. Because relational aggression is not tangible, and there are no policies that could possibly police the intention behind subtle and aggressive actions (Mayo, 2009), these actions often go unaddressed from a disciplinary standpoint.

Effects of Relational Aggression

Regardless of whether girls act in a "feminine" manner or not, girls tend to rely on relationships during adolescence for support (Brown, 2003), their friendships are interwoven in a complicated fashion with both their self-identity (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) and levels of self-esteem (Heim, Murphy, & Golant, 2003). When girls fight among friends, as they commonly do (Simmons, 2011), it can have traumatic short-term implications for girls' self- esteem, self-concept, and overall emotional well-being (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Heim et al., 2003; Young et al., 2010). The long-term effects can be even more serious and include feelings of rejection, social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and lowered sense of self worth; they may also act out aggressively or out of character, exhibit anxiety, avoidance, and varying degrees of psychological distress (Young et al., 2010).

Relational Aggression in Other Groups

Most of the literature surrounding relational aggression has constructed relational aggression as an issue that primarily concerns girls. Social mores that have been elaborated upon in the preceding sections have explained why relational aggression is more pervasive in adolescent girls than adolescent boys, although the latter might also occur. Young et al. (2010) is one of the few works reviewed here where both girls and

boys have been discussed as having the potential to be either perpetrators or targets of relationally aggressive acts. Although both boys and girls may have the propensity to act in relationally aggressive ways, from a critical feminist perspective, a distinction has been made in these two types of aggression. Because the systemic causes for relational aggression, as discussed earlier, are rooted in male hegemony and unequal allocation of power, it is distinct from the type of social aggression that boys might exhibit. While most studies have contended that girls are the most typical targets of relational aggression, Mayo (2009) has discussed how LGBTQ youth are also frequently engaged in acts of relational aggression (both as targets and perpetrators), regardless of whether they are male or female.

Economic and Racialized Discrepancies

While girls more than boys tend to engage in acts of and report being targeted by relational aggression (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2005; Lamb, 2001; Lamb & Brown, 2006), their experiences vary due to other fixed external forces. It is important to acknowledge that many of the researchers and scholars cited in the sections above have worked predominantly with White middle class girls on their relational aggression research. To their credit, many of the authors and scholars have postulated that relational aggression may be an epidemic affecting predominantly White middle class girls who are constricted by the most by rigid gender norms (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2011; Tanembaum, 2002). Their argument is that middle class girls tend to experience the pressure of gender dichotomies strictly, and thus their aggression manifests in the most feminine way conceivable. On the other hand, studies including African American girls who are raised in working class families show

different experiences with aggression as a byproduct of their upbringing (see Hill & Sprague 1998; Peters, 1988; Putallaz, Grimes, Foster, Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dearing, 2007).

Of course, discrepancies between all children are present as a condition of their upbringing. Differences in how girls experience relational aggression can exist between African American girls and European American girls because of how they are raised. African American families are more likely to raise their female children with more gender neutral values (independence, assertiveness, and strength) than girls raised in European American families (see Hill & Sprague 1998; Peters, 1988; Putallaz et al., 2007). Because relational aggression has been associated with girls being socialized according to rigid gender dichotomies, it can be assumed that girls who are not as heavily exposed to those ideas have a tendency to act differently. There have been no studies published to date that have looked explicitly at the correlation between race and relational aggression, but many scholars have suggested that African American girls are more likely to experience and commit more masculinized acts of aggression as a condition of their family upbringing and ideas of femininity reinforced in African American households.

Like racialized discrepancies, there may also be a difference in the prevalence of relational aggression across social classes. Female children who grow up in poor, inner-city neighborhoods are more likely to engage in physical aggression than their suburban and rural counterparts—who exhibit higher instances of relational aggression (Putallaz et al., 2007). Again, there have been no major studies on relational aggression with the intent of examining the relationship between social class and relational aggression. However, Brown (2003), and others (Osterman, Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukiainen,

Huesmann, & Fraczek, 1994; Putallaz et al., 2007) have postulated that the different daily realities of female children in working class communities allow them to be less tightly bound to pervasive middle class gender norms and notions of femininity, or conversely, there may be a necessity to directly defy them. Furthermore, egalitarian views on society might have also contributed to girls exhibiting overt or physical aggression more frequently. Because many working class households are headed by single mothers (National Women's Law Center, 2012), "femininity" may look stronger and more independent than it does in middle class communities.

Interestingly, like girls who are raised in working class families, girls who are born into wealthy families have been identified as a group where relational aggression may take place less frequently (Simmons, 2011). More studies should be conducted on the experiences of upper class girls and feelings of gender equality. Some scholars have postulated that these girls may possibly feel less restricted by gender inequalities because they experience the privilege and entitlement of their elevated social class and cultural status. It might be worthwhile to investigate how girls from upper class families have adopted the aggressive practices of their middle class peers, and thus still engage in relationally aggressive acts.

Relational Aggression in a Digital Age

Cyber aggression is a unique behavior that falls on the continuum of aggression and has a complicated relationship to relational aggression. Because there is such a preponderance of literature surrounding cyber aggression (or cyberbullying), there simply cannot be a complete overview of the topic here. With that said, it must be briefly

discussed because of its close relationship and relevance to the issue of relational aggression.

In the age of social media, girls have cited Facebook as a huge source of stress and anxiety in their daily lives, especially in the ways the website serves as an outward expression of a girl's status and popularity, as compared to her peers (Simmons, 2011). This digital age has added another level of complexity to the issue of female peer relationships in adolescence (Young, et al., 2010) because not only does relational aggression appear to be *increasing in prevalence* but also girls appear to be increasingly vicious. Increased interaction due to computer and technology-mediated communication may very well have been the catalyst, and it has certainly made relational aggression more difficult to address (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Young et al., 2010). Many of the authors cited here have spoken to the increased complexity of adolescent friendship issues, within the context of the information age.

Patchin and Hinduja (2010) have written in great depth about the negative socioemotional effects of cyberbullying and have found that girls report being targeted more frequently than boys. Girls are likely to reach out to one another in these ways; however, with increased interaction also comes increased potential for negative interaction. Whereas bullying used to be isolated events that occurred between school bells, the digital age has allowed relational aggression to infiltrate the lives of girls when school is over, even into the comfort and safety of their own homes (Simmons, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, in 2012, a Canadian teenager named Amanda Todd, committed suicide because she experienced incessant aggression (from every point on the continuum of aggression) at school, on Facebook and Twitter, through physical violence,

and a variety of other means (Grenoble, 2012). Because of relational aggression, Todd changed schools several times to escape other teens that tormented her. However, her aggressors were able to continue their emotional and psychological abuse through popular social networking cites like Facebook and Twitter. Feeling the helplessness of not being able to escape her tormentors, Todd tried several times, and eventually succeeded in taking her own life. Perhaps the point that illustrates how vicious online aggression can become, due to the perceived anonymity and safety of online forums, is that some teens to continue to target Todd's memorial pages with relationally aggressive posts, even after her death. This story, albeit tragic, is so important to the research conducted in this study because it exposes the darkest side of relational aggression (exacerbated through modern technology), which can have horrible long-term effects on adolescents.

Relational Aggression and Girl Culture

In girl culture, acts of relational aggression and responses to relationally aggressive acts have their own set of unspoken rules for engagement. Additionally, girls tend to internalize systemic views of femininity and hold one another to those gendered expectations. What is most shocking is the extent to which relational aggression is related to the preservation of the status quo, where girls hold themselves and other girls to misogynistic views of femininity (Brown, 2003). To this end, it is interesting to consider how adolescent girls, amongst themselves, might be internalizing and reproducing societal values that serve to subjugate and sexualize women. According to Brown (2003), it is common for girls to pressure one another to ascribe to the values and

behaviors deemed important by a society that systematically sexualize and devalue women in the same breath as it boasts more gender equality than ever before.

Many researchers who have written extensively about the topic of female relational aggression have stated that the ways that girls are mean to one another may not be consistent across sociological divides. Brown (2003) has provided an interesting insight that reinforces an idea that needs more consideration when looking at relational aggression, like socioeconomic status and other factors:

> Neither the literature on relational aggression nor the popular accounts of the ways girls enact it on each other seem to address the larger issue of power. Little consideration has been given to the fact that a girl's social context; the options available to her, and the culture in which she lives will affect how she aggresses. No substantive consideration has been given to the fact that girl fighting might have something to do with the range of injustices and indignities girls experience in their daily lives. (p. 17)

This has implications for future research, because many of the authors concerned with female relational aggression have stated that it seems to be a middle-class issue. The ways females of lower socioeconomic status and minority women have been reported to experience relational aggression varies. The experiences of boys and LGBTQ youth need to be specifically explored in future studies, as well.

Trivialized and Normalized Aggression

Contemporary constructs for examining and critically discussing adolescent aggression have historically left girls out of the picture. The reason is that manifestations of female aggression are discredited as nonaggressive acts. According to Martha Puttalaz

et al. (2007), if Americans were to continue to examine aggression with the typical gender-biased lens, 60% of female aggressors and 71.4% of female targets would be excluded or overlooked. These figures show the inequality present in how aggression is theorized and how interventions are designed. The reason that we have not included girls' aggression in statistics or prevention programs is that Americans have normalized "trivializing, simplistic notions of girls' anger and aggression" (Brown, 2003, p.1). This speaks to why little has been done to proactively address the issue of relational aggression and pervasive attitudes that systematically minimize the issue. Girls continue to be called catty, competitive, and bitchy. The frequency with which girls fight with other girls has been widely accepted as a rite of passage that all girls must endure. Adults' messages to girls during these difficult adolescent years have commonly taken an "it will get better" or "just wait it out" perspective. These attitudes are ineffective at addressing the real lived experiences of adolescent girls, and for some, the aggression that they endure during their adolescent years can be absolutely hellish.

As discussed earlier, the way we socialize our young boys and girls based on their gender are directly connected to the ways they exhibit aggression (Mann, 1994). We encourage boys to be active and aggressive, whereas we teach girls that they should be kind and polite, and the ways children exhibit aggressive behaviors are directly related to those values (Brown, 2003). Girls are taught to value interpersonal relationships, and they learn to define themselves by the relationships that they have. "The culture's socialization of girls as caretakers teaches them that they will be valued for their relationships with others" (Simmons, 2011, p. 10). Girls are encouraged to solve relational conflicts by asserting themselves verbally, or "talk it out" (Mann, 1994). Boys,

on the other hand, are taught that the resolution of conflicts with physical violence is socially acceptable (Brown, 2003; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011). With this in mind, it is not surprising that relational aggression is the form of bullying that seems to be associated with girls, whereas boys are characterized as being predisposed to physical fighting (Mann, 1994).

Overt physical bullying has historically received more attention than relational aggression (Young et al., 2010), a truth indicated by the fact that many schools currently have policies on violence, and there are even civil laws that protect people from physical assault. No such stance has been taken on issues of relational aggression because, by current societal standards, it is not possible to punish an intention (Mayo, 2009), only an observable action. Due to the subtle nature of relational aggression, educators and parents may not even be aware it is going on (Simmons, 2011). As a consequence, schools and institutions where relational aggression is commonplace lack clear policy intervention (Mayo, 2009). Because relational aggression typically goes unchecked, victims of this aggressive behavior may experience persistent or debilitating psychological trauma (Young et al., 2010).

Feminist Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Feminist Pedagogy

This study sought to address the pervasiveness of relational aggression among middle school girls by creating the conditions for them to critically reflect upon this phenomenon, better understand its impact on their lives, learn empowering ways to manage it, and develop the critical consciousness necessary to transform relationships with one another. This literature review has comprehensively theorized relational aggression through the lens of critical feminism, however critical pedagogy was also a

major theoretical foundation of this study. The subsequent section has elaborated upon the relationship between relational aggression and feminist theory and critical pedagogy, and discussed how feminist theory and critical pedagogy converge within the framework of feminist pedagogy.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory was identified as a theoretical frame for this study because relational aggression has been theorized as being a negative consequence in a society that systematically continues to relegate young women less power than their male counterparts, resulting in the pervasiveness of the issue. The perpetuation of negative, binary gender stereotypes are just one way "traditional" notions of femininity have been socially learned and ritualistically repeated (Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005). The major themes within feminist theory that connect to relational aggression include: binary gender stereotypes, portrayal of women in media, perceptions of social aggression among women, values of female passivity, and gendered violence. Each theme is briefly discussed below.

Binary gender stereotypes. From a feminist perspective, pervasive stereotypes about gender in American society, and the way that those stereotypes lock both men and women into "normal" behaviors, values, and ways of thinking have negative effects on both boys and girls (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994). These pervasive ideas mold children to fit into one gender or the other (masculine or feminine) on what ought to be a more flexible continuum of gender identity. Even if parents attempt to deemphasize gender as they raise their young children, once children go to school and begin interacting increasingly with teachers and

friends, they are exposed to normalized binary notions of masculinity and femininity as well as associated norms and behaviors (Mann, 1994; Mead 1934).

The ways that gender is reproduced in the classroom is an inevitable (whether intentional or unintentional) consequence of schooling in the United States (Sadker et al., 2009). Boys are taught to take risks and act boisterously, while girls are silenced and taught to be more passive both inside and outside of the classroom (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Mead, 1934; Sadker et al., 2009). Boys are directed toward subject areas and disciplines that are discovery oriented such as science, engineering, business, and math. On the other hand, girls receive messages that they are "naturally" not strong in these particular academic areas (Sadker et al., 2009). Both girls and boys can become frustrated with the feeling of being pigeonholed in a world that rigidly dictates to them how they ought to behave, speak, think, dress, and what they are able to become.

Portrayal of women in media. Although schools play a significant role in teaching gender through intentional and unintentional practices, another major way gender is reinforced is through media. In addition to traditional media outlets of television, music, movies, and magazines, teens are increasingly using the worldwide web, which exposes them to more media images than they have encountered in previous generations (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser 2013; Pachtin & Hidunja, 2014). In 2013, 73% of teens had smartphones and girls spent more time than boys using them to connect with one another and access information online (Madden et al., 2013). From a feminist perspective, common representations of women in media have harmful

effects on both men and women. According to *Media Smarts: Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy*:

> We all know the stereotypes—the femme fatale, the supermom, the sex kitten, the nasty corporate climber. Whatever the role, television, film and popular magazines are full of images of women and girls who are typically white, desperately thin, and made up to the hilt. (Media Smarts)

From the perspectives of Brown (2003) and Giroux (2010), Disney movies are a perfect example of media that appear to be innocent but are actually transmitting gender stereotypes to children from an early age. The Disney Princess Movies, which so many little girls are raised watching, reinforce the passivity, sexual objectification, hypersexualization, heteronormativity, and uniform notions of beauty along with other cultural values like competition between women, preference for whiteness, able-bodiedness, thinness, and wealth (Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2010; Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media; Media Smarts).

Perceptions of social aggression among women. From a feminist perspective, stereotypes about the way women and girls exhibit meanness toward one another include but are not limited to: competitiveness, gossiping, back-stabbing, lying, manipulating, and being untrusting and adversarial. The idea of female competition, as it has been reinforced in seemingly innocent movies produced by an apparently child-friendly enterprise like Disney-Pixar (Brown, 2003; Giroux, 2010), has created problems for women and girls. Films become just one way of reproducing the idea that girls and women should distrust one another and consistently compete for a variety of privileges ranging from getting attention from men to a place in the corporate boardroom. In

Disney movies like *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, the heroines are portrayed as young and beautiful, having older, less attractive, competitive, vilified women as their major adversaries (the entire premise of the story of *Snow White*). In other Disney movies like *Peter Pan* and *Cinderella,* girls must compete with other beautiful women for their hero's attention. On more contemporary television shows, like *The Bachelor*, women compete and backstab for affection and a proposal from a man whom they have just met and are each dating simultaneously, and the message of female competition and social aggression is presented even more overtly. However, perhaps the most quintessential example of teenage girls exhibiting a wide range of behaviors that all fall under the "relational aggression" label is the contemporary film whose title says it all, *Mean Girls*. This film has created some serious issues for girls, whether or not the film was intended to be ironic. The film brutally reinforces each stereotype for girls' meanness to one another that falls on the spectrum of relational aggression. But from my perspective, the catchy title *Mean Girls* has become a label for girls in many different situations regardless of whether they are asserting themselves positively or actually exhibiting mean behavior. Thus, from a feminist perspective, negative stereotypes about social aggression between women and between girls are negatively reinforced in media, despite increasing social awareness about the issue and its systemic causes (Brown, 2003; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Underwood, 2003; Young et al., 2010).

Values of female passivity and nonassertiveness. Women and girls are consistently sent messages that they should be demure, passive, and amicable, even at the expense of their own needs and wants. For Giroux (2010), the fact that Ariel in *The Little*

Mermaid literally trades her voice to gain the affection of the charming, handsome prince is not a coincidence; it is a perfect example of something that happens to girls in a society that is patriarchal and male-dominated. Through hidden curricula in schools, girls are taught that being quiet, calm, and less boisterous than boys is expected of them when they are out in the world (Mann, 1994; McLaren, 2002; Sadker et al., 2009). Women and girls who assert themselves are frequently called "bitchy" or "bossy" rather than "assertive" or "determined," an issue recently promoted by the *Ban Bossy* campaign (2014) and the book *Lean In* by Cheryl Sandberg (2013). The reason for such a campaign is that media has frequently reinforced the perspective that assertive or powerful women are, by definition, "bitches." The 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada* comes to mind in thinking about women who have corporate success being portrayed as evil and conniving. The main character in the film was simultaneously depicted as having scarified love and family for success in her career, reinforcing the message that success and happiness are mutually exclusive for working women. For women who exhibit physical prowess and bravery, the *femme fatale* is still a dominant typology in everything from comic books to motion pictures (Brown, 2003; Media Smarts).

A consequence of the stereotype that strong, opinionated, or assertive is somehow not feminine gives girls less of a voice in the world and impacts the way they speak to men and one another (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Mead, 1934; Sadker et al., 2009). From a feminist perspective, a consequence is that women and girls have fewer opportunities to practice assertive communication because this is not a widely valued characteristic of women in the world. Something often overlooked is that the feminist perspective is also concerned about the

impact this has on young men; boys who do not exhibit traditionally "male" characteristics are often told to "man up," which is equally problematic from a sociological perspective (*Man Up Campaign*). The ways relational aggression manifests: quietly, covertly, and in other ways that can be difficult to detect fits directly into this social schema.

Gendered violence. In 2009, the *Man Up Campaign* was founded in conjunction with the Clinton foundation and UNIFEM. Their mission is:

> To engage youth in a global movement to end gender-based violence and advance gender equality through programming and support of youth-led initiatives intended to transform communities, nations, and the world by promoting gender equality and sensitivity amount global youth. (www.manupcampaign.org)

The connection between dominant gender ideologies and violence against women is directly correlated and supported by statistics about violence against women (UNIFEM). From a feminist perspective, the idea that women are somehow less human, often lacking the social agency and legal protection that would make them more equal to men is directly linked to women being overrepresented in statistics as victims of rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and even violent acts committed at random (*Man Up Campaign;* UNIFEM). To be clear, this does suggest that men do not also suffer as the targets of these types of crimes as well; the argument from a feminist perspective simply problematizes the fact that are overrepresented in these statistics.

Critical Pedagogy

Whereas feminist theory was largely used as a means to contextualize the problem articulated in this study, critical pedagogy was the framework that informed the

methodology, data collection, and curriculum program selection. From a critical pedagogical perspective, relational aggression has been theorized as having roots in a hegemonic society whereby girls are either forced to be or are unknowingly complicit in a patriarchal system. In order for girls to become aware of this oppression, to be able to think and speak critically about the issues, and to be able to develop practices deal with it in their lives, strategies grounded in critical pedagogy must be employed. The themes within critical pedagogy that have a connection to relational aggression and ways to preclude relational aggression in girls' lives include: dialogical strategies, critical consciousness, awareness of divide-and-rule tactics within society, and a democratizing praxis whereby girls come together to empower themselves and one another in educational programs. Each of these themes has been discussed briefly in the subsequent section.

Dialogical strategies. From a critical pedagogical perspective, educational practices that are egalitarian and communicative can promote critical understanding and liberation. According to bell hooks (1994):

> To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (p. 130).

Dialogue is a central component of critical pedagogical praxis because it literally allows students to have a voice in the classroom, countering the traditional domesticating qualities Freire argued have become a part of educative practices (Darder, 2002). In true dialogical praxis, teachers allow students the flexibility to control the conversation,

knowing that students come to a deep understanding of issues that are personally important to them when they are able to co-construct knowledge with one another. According to Donaldo Macedo, dialogue is not a mere teaching tactic:

> In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic undertaking of dialogue as a mere technique. Dialogue does not represent a somewhat false path that I attempt to elaborate on and realize in the sense of involving ingenuity of the other. On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (Foreword: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 2000, p. 17)

Thus, dialogical praxis directly counters the model that Freire (1970) has called the "banking model" of education whereby teachers deposit knowledge, often riddled with ideas about knowledge and knowing which serve to intentionally or unintentionally reproduce hegemony in society. This "banking model" conceptualizes teachers and students as complicit in educational practices that reproduce injustice and oppression in society (Freire, 1970). Teachers have control of the information and "deposit" that information into students' minds. Dialogical strategies seek to turn this structure completely on its end, requiring the teacher to be comfortable with relinquishing control

in the traditional sense, while students are able to navigate through processes collectively and collaboratively. This means that the traditional classroom with an agenda and "objective" assessments becomes less important because students come to a different way of learning and knowing through this practice, which may be difficult to measure at first. This strategy is just one way teachers can consciously counter the hegemonic properties of traditional educational models in their classrooms (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), allowing students to speak, but teaching them the importance of listening respectfully (hooks, 1994) as a classroom practice.

Critical consciousness. Through dialogical classroom practices and the co-construction of knowledge that is important to them, interesting things can take place in the classroom, which may not result in the same experience teachers would have designed in the traditional banking model discussed above. Through true critical pedagogical praxis, the ultimate goal is for the oppressed to understand the sources of their oppression and come together to challenge it in a way that is empowering and humanizing (Freire, 1970). According to Freire (2000), achieving critical consciousness means "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35).

Critical consciousness, thus, is the ultimate goal of critical educational praxis. Freire (2000) argued that once the oppressed are able to perceive their own oppression, they have a responsibility to act against it. Although this idea is quite radical in nature, Freire (2000) has justified this by saying this "would constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity" (p. 45).

Through engagement in dialogical praxis, students go from "learning" in the traditional sense to being called to act. This comes from becoming able to talk about, build off of one another's experiences, listen and participate when conversations become difficult, and remain at the table when it is easier to walk away. When this happens, and when students become invested in struggling through these practices together, they come to a more authentic and organic understanding of the world around them. When students are able to identify the sources of their oppression, and become united in their shared oppressive circumstances, they begin to develop the agency to take action against the forms and sources of their oppression (Freire, 1970). The "act of love" in critical pedagogy comes from a concept of shared humanity (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970). This notion of humanity is not a traditional, simplistic view. As Darder has written, to Freire, humanity was " a deeply reflective interpretation of the dialectical relationship between our cultural existence as individuals and our political and economic existence as social beings" (Darder, 2002, p. 498).

Divide and rule. Patriarchal society continues to pit young women against one another in ways that prevent them from unifying against the sources of their oppression. According to Freire (1970), this "divide and rule" tactic has prevented the "unifying action indispensable to liberation" (p. 173). What was originally a discussion primarily about class can be expanded to include other oppressed groups, whether that oppression is fueled by race, gender, size, physical ability, or even sexual orientation. According to Freire (1970), for the dominant group in a hegemonic system to maintain the power that is both comfortable and desirable, there must be an oppressed counterpart within society to create that dichotomy. If oppressed groups were to gain more power, the implications

for the group in power would be the loss of some of the power they are more comfortable with.

Democratizing praxis. As discussed above, the banking model of education reinforces hegemonic social order and does education *to* students rather than with them. Integrating dialogue into the classroom is one practice critical educators can use in their classrooms to allow students more control over their own educational experiences. At its core, critical pedagogy sees education as an opportunity to provide space for the oppressed to develop critical consciousness as well as social agency. If education is done in a way that honors the framework set forth by critical pedagogy, it can be used to counter domesticating, hegemonic practices, which perpetuate a hegemonic social order and dehumanize the constituents within those social systems.

Feminist Pedagogy

Due to the fact that relational aggression has been discussed at length as a product of girls' social learning in a male hegemonic society, the empowerment framework embedded in feminist pedagogy provides a way to appropriately respond to relational aggression in educative contexts. *Feminist pedagogy* is literally a teaching philosophy and practice influenced by both critical pedagogical praxis and feminist theory, which is why it is important to discuss here. Feminist pedagogy can best be explained as "a set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing, approaches to content across disciplines, and instructional relationships that are grounded in critical pedagogical and feminist theory" (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009, p. 2). Feminist pedagogy is a participatory, democratic process designed to foster critical thinking and promote continuous questioning—ideas closely connected to the work of Paulo Freire (Shrewsbury, 1993). There are three

common themes embedded in the literature about feminist pedagogy, which are discussed briefly below. The connection between these themes and this study is discussed more specifically in Chapter 3.

Empowerment. First, feminist pedagogy asserts that feminist education is empowering and that participants should be engaged in a process around the desire to create a more humane social order, not limiting the power of a few, but enhancing the power of all actors in a hegemonic world (Shrewsbury, 1997). This idea is congruent with Freire's (1970) argument that for oppressed groups to be liberated, the dominant group would have to relinquish some amount of power and control of society. However, feminist pedagogy is strategic in using language that is inclusive, rather than adopting "radicalized" ideologies of social change, and the distinction that the desire to enhance the power of all actors, rather than to limit the power of the oppressor is identified as a core consideration of this pedagogical praxis (Shrewsbury, 1997). According to Freire (1970), for oppressed groups to surmount their situation of oppression, they must be able to critically analyze its causes so that through "transforming action," they can create a situation that allows them to pursue a "fuller humanity" (2002, p. 47).

Caring. Caring on its own is something that wonderful teachers already integrate into their classrooms, regardless of whether they identify this as a feminist pedagogical practice. For bell hooks, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our student is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). According to Rebecca Ropers-Huilman, "The ways in which teachers and students can be powerful is related to the way in which we have constructed caring relationships in our classrooms" (2009, p. 55). In these

perspectives, teachers have the power to enact a culture of caring in the classroom, in alignment with a critical pedagogical value of shared humanity (Freire, 1970) both inside the classroom and out. But caring in feminist pedagogy is not just limited to common ideas about caring: kindness, compassion, and nurturing. Additionally, it is not just something that ought to occur in the relationships between teacher and student. In the feminist pedagogical sense, "caring" is grounded in community, or the act of consciously bringing care and compassion into the classroom along with a sense of collective responsibility for others in the classroom community and the world at large (Shrewsbury, 1997). The way students interact with one another, collectively problem solving, and deeply caring about the success of students in the classroom community, rather than simply one's own achievement, is integral to feminist pedagogical praxis.

Leadership. Feminist pedagogy is not a "pure" practice because, by design, there is an inherent power dynamic between teacher and student in most classrooms (Caughie & Pierce, 2009). Additionally, there may be power dynamics at play between students, which include: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and physical and academic ability. Leadership in the classroom: both the practices of it being shared among participants, and the teacher being cognizant of her role as *the* leader is imperative in feminist pedagogical praxis. Thus, leadership is a foundation of feminist pedagogy, where the goal is for teachers and students to become jointly responsible for the learning and problem solving that takes place within the context of the classroom (Shrewsbury, 1997). According to Lili Kim (2009), "to fully practice feminist pedagogy, the teacher becomes an authority *with* the students, not *over* them" (p. 197). Deconstructing the authoritative role of the teacher, being cognizant of other power dimensions in the classroom, teaching listening

and engagement, and creating an environment where the goal is collectively achieving learning and growth is a central objective to feminist pedagogical praxis (hooks, 1994).

Summary of the Literature

At its core, relational aggression is a feminist issue. In this chapter, the deep-rooted connection between critical feminism and relational aggression was discussed at great length. When examining the literature on relational aggression, an important starting point is the socialization of girls. Gender is both socially constructed (Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005), and culturally reinforced (Biggs, 2011; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir, 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lloyd, 2007; Mann, 1994). As a result, girls are exposed to notions typical "feminine" behaviors, such as appropriate ways for exhibiting aggression (Mann, 1994), which directly inform the ways they act aggressively toward one another (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

Relational aggression is pervasive and affects girls from all backgrounds (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). However, girls' propensity to act in relationally aggressive ways may also be impacted by external factors such as race (Hill & Sprague 1998; Peters, 1988; Putallaz et al., 2007) and class (Brown, 2003; Osterman et al., 1994; Putallaz et al., 2007). Adolescent boys and LGBTQ youth have been known to exhibit and be targeted by relationally aggressive behaviors as well (Young et al., 2010), although girls exhibit and are targeted by these behaviors much more frequently (Brown, 2003; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb, 2001; Underwood, 2003; Young et al., 2010). Regardless of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, the effects of relational aggression can have drastic long- and short-term effects for targets including

but not limited to antisocial behavior, depression, aggression, and lowered self-esteem (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Young et al., 2010). The age of digital connectivity and social networking media add a layer of complexity to the issue of relational aggression and attempts to address it (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010, Simmons, 2011). With all of the aforementioned information considered, relational aggression is certainly a serious problem adolescent girls face—one that deserves both serious attention and a preventative approach. Very little has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs designed to decrease relational aggression, a discussion to which this research study has sought to contribute.

This review of the literature speaks to why this work is compelling and how it pertains to social justice in education. The next chapter outlines the research methods and procedures employed in this study. Relational aggression was theorized in this study through a feminist lens as a manifestation of girls' aggression as a consequence of their oppression in society. Critical pedagogy is an educative praxis whose central purpose is to stimulate dialogue between members of oppressed groups as a means to reach conscientization about their state of oppression. The subsequent study was designed with feminist theory and critical pedagogy in mind. These two theories converge to create a critical feminist pedagogy, which has also informed the choice of methodology, the choice of the curriculum program that was implemented, as well as the way that data was collected and coded. These methods will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study engaged both feminist theory and critical pedagogy as a means to deconstruct the issue of relational aggression in adolescent girls and offer possible alternatives to address girls' apparent propensity to act in relationally aggressive ways. I have sought to contribute to the growing body of literature pertaining to relational aggression and address a gap in the research pertaining to the effectiveness of preventative program approaches. The cornerstone of this research and the design of this study was my refusal to accept relational aggression as a mere "rite of passage" for adolescent girls. Instead, I have conceptualized this research with the premise that given the tools and information to do so, girls have the ability to develop strategies to deal with relational aggression in their lives in ways that are both empowering and humanizing.

My own membership in the millennial generation with whom I work has given this study a deeply personal dimension. As a result, I have made a conscious effort with this qualitative study to retain the power and impact of girls' voices as they participated in a program that was designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls. The program I selected was designed to create a safe space for girls to speak openly about issues central to their lives in the contemporary world. This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the current study and describes the *From Adversaries to Allies*, the curriculum program that Lyn Mikel Brown and Mary Madden (2009) designed that provided the lessons I have presented to the participants in this study.

Qualitative Design

Relational aggression is an issue that is deeply personal to adolescent girls because it is a common[2] and painful aspect of their lives. The objective of this study was to collect data about two phenomena that are both highly subjective and quite personal to the participants. For these reasons, the best way to collect data in this study was to adopt a qualitative methodology. I considered the voices of the adolescent girls who participated in this program the most central and important data that were collected. Thus a qualitative inquiry provided access and depth into the human aspect of this study (Merriam, 2009). This honored the voices of the participants as the most important way to measure the impact of a program on girls' critical consciousness about relational aggression and the methods they developed to address it in their own lives. The sections below provide a detailed overview of the research methodology that was used to conduct this research study, the methods of data collection, and the means by which the data were analyzed and interpreted. Detailed accounts of participants' experiences in the program are detailed at length in Chapter 4.

Research Question

The central purpose of this study was to understand and describe the ways that participation in a curriculum program that was designed to decrease relational aggression related to the development of critical consciousness of relational aggression in adolescent girls. One central research question informed this research study: *In what ways does a curriculum designed to decrease relational aggression among middle school girls impact*

[2] According to Puttalaz et al. (2007), 60% of adolescent females report having been a perpetrator of a relationally aggressive act and 71.4% have been targeted by such actions within a 30-day period. Simmons (2011) argued that all girls have at least witnessed a relationally aggressive action at some point during adolescence.

critical consciousness of relational aggression among the participants? Because this question asked *in what ways*, I selected a descriptive, qualitative methodology to collect the data necessary for answering it.

Definition of Relational Aggression

In this study, I have defined *relational aggression* as subtle acts of aggression, exclusion, manipulation, or invalidation, which can be either intentional or unintentional and are hurtful to the target; it encompasses starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl, and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women); and, like most behaviors, it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme. This definition draws heavily upon the typology posited by Dellasega and Nixon (2003); additional components of the definition used in this study were derived from Derald Wing Sue's definition of *microaggressions* (2010). Relational aggression is a type of bullying behavior (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003), which was further defined as something that happens face-to-face, indirectly, or asynchronously by communicating with a digital medium such as social media or text messages.

Definition of Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness was defined as the ways girls identified, spoke about, and expressed critical awareness of relational aggression in society, developing practices to address it in their lives in ways that are empowering and humanizing. This study consisted of 10 sessions in which an existing curriculum was implemented. I recorded, transcribed, and coded each session, and compared the data to the literature to identify major themes that emerged pertaining to participants' ability to identify, articulate, reflect

upon, and express critical thought about relational aggression after participating in the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum program. In this study, critical consciousness was conceptualized as a synonym for Freire's (1970) term, *conscientizacao,* or raising of social consciousness about the condition of oppressed populations in society. Raising critical awareness about systemic issues that lead to relational aggression in girls' lives was an intended consequence of the feminist pedagogical praxis embedded in the curriculum program I selected (Shrewsbury, 1997).

The corroboration of *conscientizacao* with the existing theories about relational aggression is a new discussion, about which this study sought to uncover more information. The central idea was that as girls developed better understanding about gender dichotomies in society, they would more deeply understand their own oppression within that system. Thus, a secondary objective of this research became the investigation of the possible relationship between critical theory, feminist pedagogy, and relational aggression through the analysis of the data, building upon grounded theory pertaining to causes and effects of relational aggression in order to further develop social justice focus of this study. I employed grounded theory as a means to analyze the data and connect it to the existing theories to determine if any new theories emerged. According to Charmaz (2008), "A grounded theory approach encourages researchers to remain close to their studied worlds and to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts from their empirical materials that not only synthesize and interpret them, but also show processual relationships" (p. 84). In this study, theory both informed and was considered a possible result of the inquiry in this study.

Participatory Action Research

Classroom teachers engage in the practice of conducting action research every day. It is the most basic part of what good educators do—ask a question about how something can be improved, implement the change, evaluate the change, and make suggestions or recommendations for the future (Merriam, 2009). The difference between practitioner action research in the classroom and research grounded in theory (such as the current study) is the scope and technicality of the project—experimenting with a new classroom activity versus a dissertation or research study. Whether empirical or practical, in every action research study (formal or informal), improving the experience of constituents is at the heart (Baum, McDougall & Smith, 2006). According to Herr and Anderson (2005), action research provides an opportunity to engage in: "Inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions" (p. 3).

Feminist pedagogy was embedded in the design, data collection, and implementation of this study, which set out to create a safe space group whereby girls could empower themselves and one another through the development of positive and less adversarial female relationships. The implementation of a well-researched curriculum and the collection of data to assess the impact on girls' critical consciousness of relational aggression was the action executed in this study. The collection of qualitative data in order to make subsequent recommendations to improve the programming available to students at the school site was the research component. This study made every attempt to

provide some level of generalizability whereby these recommendations would be helpful to other schools seeking to implement such a program or others like it.

I identified *Participatory action research* (PAR) as the best methodology for this study because the research design embodied a process of circular inquiry and a desire to improve student experience. Participatory action research (PAR) is a common method of qualitative inquiry used in various fields, particularly nursing (see Baum, McDougall, & Smith, 2006), but this methodology is increasingly emerging as a tool that is gaining traction in the field of educational research. PAR is an ideal methodology for educational research because it allows practitioners to implement an action designed to improve student experience (or experiences of other members of the school or community), collect data that assesses the impact of the action, and ultimately act upon the data collected to inform future action, gradually making changes for the benefit of all members of the community. According to, Baum et al. (2006), PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it for the better:

> At its heart [of PAR] is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives (p. 855).

Participatory Action Research was selected as the methodology for this study because it honors the fundamental considerations, which are central to both critical pedagogy and

critical feminism. According to Baum et al. (2006), "Critical theorists use critical reflection on social reality to take action for change by radically calling into question the cultures that they study" (856). The first major connection between this methodology and the framework for this study was the empowerment framework embedded within PAR; "It focuses on research whose purpose is to enable action" (Baum et al., p. 855).

I determined the need to implement an action by conducting a thorough review of the literature, and drew from the years of experience I have had working with young girls in middle school. Action in this study (the implementation of the program curriculum to address relational aggression) preceded the data collection. The data collection, in turn, informed the recommendations for future action. The action in this study was designed to be an emancipatory praxis to develop critical consciousness (see Freire, 1970) in adolescent girls about relational aggression.

The second component of PAR that made it relevant this study was that in PAR the researcher must pay "careful attention to power relationships, advocating for power to be deliberately shared between the researcher and the researched" (Baum et al., 2006, p. 855). This implied that the line between researcher and the researched should be blurred whenever possible, and that the participants in the study should have an active voice in order to maintain a great deal of leverage and power throughout the course of the study. The young women in this study were engaged as active participants in the research study and their voices were central in the data collected. Their experiences were collected through audio recordings and handwritten class assignments. Time spent coding these audio recordings and the handwritten assignments have heavily informed my recommendations for actions that should be implemented moving forward. PAR was

ideal for this kind of study because it counters traditional positivist methodologies; PAR understands that there is no single reality that can be independently or objectively observed, outside of the context that produces it. To that end, it was incredibly important to express the context in which this study took place, and provide as much insight to the multidimensional experience of participants as possible with the data collected.

The third reason I selected PAR for this study was that participants would be involved as active participants in the research process. From the inception of this program, the female middle school students who participated in this study were informed that they would be instrumental in posing the final recommendations that came out of this research. Their voices, their reflections, and their opinions on the content covered have all been considered in the findings and conclusions for this study. The conclusions and recommendations are grounded in this data, as are the reflections on what I learned from them as a participant and observer in the action research process.

Procedures

In this PAR study, I implemented a curriculum program designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls at a private, K–12 school (described in detail below). Research was collected in the form of qualitative data in order assess the ways a program designed to decrease relational aggression impacted participants' *critical consciousness* about relational aggression. The data was coded for two phenomena: (a) Critical consciousness, or participants' ability to identify, speak about, and express critical awareness of relational aggression in society, and (b) The ways girls developed practices to address it in their lives. An overview of the curriculum program, research

site, procedures employed, selection of participants, and the methods of data collection are detailed in the sections below.

Curriculum Program

Feminist and critical pedagogical theories were the theoretical frameworks that informed this study. As such, it was important to select a curriculum program designed by researchers who deeply understood the connection between these and relational aggression. The *From Adversaries to Allies Curriculum Program* (Brown & Madden, 2009) was most aligned with feminist pedagogical praxis and feminist ideologies of knowledge and knowing while integrating critical pedagogical classroom strategies (Appendix A). The lessons in this program were designed to expose gender bias in media and in society, as well as the power of stereotypes to show girls how these forces divide girls and pit them against one another (discussed in the program synopsis below). In addition to providing an opportunity for girls to critically explore the systemic causes for relational aggression, the pedagogical practices embedded in the curriculum are consistent with critical pedagogical praxis (particularly as they are elaborated upon in the *Facilitators Guide to Being Muse*—Appendix B). These factors made this program an ideal choice for this study.

According to Brown and Madden (2009), the common "girls will be girls" attitude that negates the importance of relational aggression cuts girls off from much-needed programs and support like this curriculum program. As I previously mentioned, the underlying desire to conduct this study was fueled by a refusal to accept the relational aggression (the status quo) as an inescapable rite of passage for adolescent girls. This research was built upon the premise that if girls are provided with an opportunity to

engage with the issues surrounding relational aggression and its systemic causes, and are taught to develop tools to deal with it in their lives, that relational aggression constitutes less of a threat to girls' adolescent lives than it currently does.

The *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum program has taken the latest in relational aggression research into a comprehensive program designed to build alliances and break down adversarial relationships that relational aggression in girls builds up. Concerned with the many ways society attempts to employ "divide and rule" tactics (Freire, 1970), pitting girls against one another, this program advocates for healthier peer relationships among girls and critical discussion about a society where girls continue to be treated so differently than boys (Brown & Madden, 2009). According to Brown and Madden (2009):

> At the heart of this project is the view that girls can be loyal and compassionate toward one another, that they can understand and question societal stereotypes and media messages that divide them, and that, given a chance to really think and do something about it, they will choose to have a girl's back rather than stab her in the back. (p. 5)

Although this research study implemented the *From Adversaries to Allies* program to assess changes in the students who participate, the objective was not to critique or evaluate the curriculum program itself. Instead, the data were used to investigate girls' critical awareness and consciousness of relational aggression and its systemic causes on participants. Because the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) curriculum was created by researchers who have spent many years

researching relational aggression and perfecting their program, the predicted outcome was that the program would have a positive impact.

Research Setting

Oceanside School is a private, nonreligious, independent, coeducational, K–12 school operating in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Pacific Southwest, established in the early 1900s as a boarding school, like many of the other long-standing private schools on the West Coast. The name of the school, participants, and all individuals involved in the study were given fictitious names to protect their anonymity. Oceanside operates from its original location in the suburb of a southwestern metropolitan city in the United States. At the time of this study, 865 students from 30 different communities near or within the city surrounds were enrolled. During the 2012–2013 school year, 180 students were enrolled in seventh through eighth grades at the middle school level. According to information published on the school's website, 43% of students enrolled at Oceanside School identified as "students of color," at the time of this study. The school offered a finite amount of tuition assistance for families that qualify, and, at the time of the study, only about 15% of the student body currently were receiving financial aid. The majority of families pay the full amount for tuition, which was $27,000 during the 2012–2013 school year. Oceanside School serves an affluent community; in 2011, the median household income for the surrounding area was $159,134 per year (citydata.com) while the average home price was $1,339,927 (citydata.com). The school was focused on student achievement and academic rigor; the average GPA of seniors in 2012–2013 was 3.80. In 2011, two years before the study was

conducted, 83% of graduates were admitted to the top 10% of universities in the United States, and 53% of faculty members held a graduate degree or higher.

Wellness curriculum at Oceanside. The *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum was designated for girls in sixth through eighth grades because much of the research on relational aggression cites the early teen years, or middle school, as the years in which RA reaches its apex (Brown & Madden, 2009). In order to reach out to the population of teens who suffer most directly from relational aggression as a part of their daily lives and provide them with an opportunity to uncover the systemic causes and cultivate an atmosphere of critical dialogue about relational aggression, I identified seventh-grade girls as the target participants for this study.

Approximately five years before the present study took place, Oceanside School implemented a fifth through ninth Student Wellness program sequence. Students are required to participate in Student Wellness classes, where students learn about health and wellness (from emotional to academic) in small classes facilitated by Oceanside teachers and counselors. The seventh-grade course is a health and study skills class designed with wellness of students in mind. At the time of the study, the school culture was one that was excited by new, emerging research in education as a means to reflect and improve upon current practice, and the school agreed to allow students to participate in the *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden, 2009) program during the third trimester of the school year.

Gaining access. At the time this study took place, I was employed as an eighth- and ninth-grade humanities teacher at Oceanside School. The 2012–2013 school year was my first year as a member of the faculty at Oceanside School. I worked on the same

campus that all students who participated in this study attended daily, but my interaction with them was limited before the study took place. As a study hall proctor, I recognized some of the students who had been present in study halls assigned to me, but I did not know them on a first-name basis before the study began.

While interviewing for the teaching position that I held when this study took place, I approached the assistant head of school with my research and requested her support in implementing a program designed to decrease relational aggression among middle school girls, in concert with the school's existing wellness program and efforts to curb issues of meanness and bullying on campus. The school agreed, and I volunteered to teach the course without receiving an additional stipend in order to implement the program in a course that was otherwise outside of my designated teaching position.

As an employee of the school, it was easy for me to access the administration, although the process of gaining the consent of the school was a thorough process. After proposing my initial research and sending my research application to the IRB committee for review, I worked closely with the assistant head of school, Dr. Donna Demarco, to outline the course and reach out to possible participants. Once I outlined my study and obtained her permission, I requested a letter of permission from the head of school, Mr. Tom Hall (Appendix C). After obtaining Mr. Hall's written consent to allow the study to take place on campus, Dr. Demarco emailed a letter of introduction to all parents of seventh-grade students, regardless of whether they were male or female (Appendix D). Dr. Demarco introduced me, provided an overview of the study, and outlined the process for giving consent for children to participate in the study.

Participants

Extracurricular context. Student enrollment in Student Wellness is compulsory at Oceanside School, but students do not receive a grade for the class. Students are expected to attend the course and would receive detention if they did not attend, but there are no other requirements for participation. Under no circumstances would a student be required to repeat the course. Whereas Student Wellness classes are typically grouped heterogeneously by gender, during the 2012–2013 school year, the school made concessions for this study and divided the classes into gender-specific sessions. Aside from the need to create homogenous gender groups for this study, the school had no strong pedagogical stance on whether the classes should be separated by gender or whether they should be coed.

One instructor taught all sections (male and female) before the study took place. Students were not tracked into one section or the other based on academic aptitude because there was no honors track in this middle school. With the exception of math and foreign language, students are enrolled in the same level in all of their core coursework. The Student Wellness classes took place in the afternoon, and all core academic classes took place before lunch. Students' extracurricular enrollment (in drama, art. and sports) was the only factor that would have impacted the makeup of a particular session of an afternoon course. This session of the course took place on Friday afternoon, which meant that there was little to no conflict with students' other afternoon activities. When the program for this study was implemented, the original instructor continued to teach two male and one female section of the course, and I was assigned to the second all-female section to implement the *From Adversaries to Allies* program.

Subject recruitment and informed consent. Once Dr. Demarco made initial contact with parents of seventh grade children, I reached out to all seventh-grade students individually by mail. I sent each family a written copy of the letter of introduction along with two copies of the informed consent form and the experimental subject bill of rights, one to return, and one for their records. Along with the documents, an addressed envelope was included, so parents could mail their consent forms to the school, or send the consent form to school with their child. I waited two weeks to obtain all the consent forms, and sent a weekly reminder to the families via email that the deadline to send in their documentation was approaching. At the end of the two-week period, the parents of 16 girls and 11 boys consented to allow their children to participate in the study. At that point, I organized and stored all of the consent forms and provided the school registrar with a list of all female students' names whose parents consented to allow them to participate in the class. She enrolled the 16 girls whose parents gave them permission to participate in the section of the course I taught. The boys who consented to participate in the study were simply enrolled in one of the two classes taught by the other instructor. One girl was allowed to add the class after the first session after a scheduling conflict was resolved, but only after obtaining the necessary permission from her parents and providing her own assent. This brought the total number of girls who participated in the study to 17.

The first day of class was dedicated to providing participants with an overview of the course, and gaining participants' assent. I explained that although their parents had given their permission, the girls still had the opportunity to decide if they wanted to participate in the study or not. Each of the 16 girls present on the first day assented to

participate in the program, and all of the participants stayed in the class for the duration of the study. The 17th girl provided her assent before the second session.

Confidentiality and anonymity. Both the informed consent form and the discussion I had with participants on the first day of the course when I gained their individual assent addressed the issue of confidentiality. In the parent consent form, I informed parents of the modes of data collection: audio recordings, written work, field notes, and participants' reflections. I assured parents in the informed consent form that every effort to conceal the identity of participants would be made, and that no data published in the findings would allow their daughters to be identified. I reiterated this to the participants in the assent form in language that was appropriate to them. I told them I would never use their name or the name of anyone else, and in order to protect their anonymity, fictitious names were used in recording and reporting the data. All field notes I compiled were coded so that no student identities were revealed. I have protected the identity of the students in Chapters four and five by using pseudonyms for all participants who were involved in this study.

Sample size and participant demographics. Seventeen seventh-grade girls participated in the study. The girls were all current seventh-grade students at the time of this study, and all of the school's seventh-grade students were given the opportunity to participate if they chose to. This sample would best be described as a convenience or opportunity sampling, as they already attended this school, and they are required to take the Student Wellness course. There were 27 female students who chose not to participate in the study. Of the 17 participants who chose to participate in the study, it was not possible to gather data as to the socioeconomic status of each family, but four of the 17

participants identified as students of color, while the rest identified as White. More information about the participants in this study is discussed in the participant composite in Chapter 4.

Measures

By designing this study, I sought to provide insight to the transformative processes that I believed would be a part of the girls' experiences in this program. As a result of conducting this research, I wanted to be able to explain the impact the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum on participants' ability to identify, articulate, reflect upon, and express critical thought about relational aggression. I employed qualitative strategies to collect data in an attempt to preserve the intimacy of participants' experiences with the program and one another. The research design and data collection was consistent with the recommendation that PAR made, which advocated for doing research *with* rather than *to* participants.

Program Design and Duration

This class met weekly on Fridays for 45 minutes, over the course of a 16-week trimester. Due to a few school holidays and a two-week spring break, there were a total of 10 full class days where the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum was implemented. Some lessons were truncated or modified for the sake of time. My goal was to ensure that students were able to experience all of the salient points of the curriculum program (detailed below), balancing both the time constraints and the desire to follow the curriculum as closely as possible. In addition, I made an effort to make sure there would be time embedded within the program to solicit feedback from participants to determine how the program could be better implemented moving forward.

The course began on Friday, March 15, 2013, and ended on Friday, June 7, 2013. I designed each course using activities included in the curriculum program. For the first nine sessions, my goal was to incorporate a major idea pertaining to relational aggression, at least one activity, and provide time for the participants to discuss the topic. The last session was dedicated to gathering feedback about how the course went. The class was not an academic class, so participants did not receive an academic grade for their participation. Attendance was mandatory, but participants were able to opt out of the course at any time during the duration of the study, at which point they would be re-enrolled in the course that met with the original instructor. However, during the course of the study, all participants who began the program stayed in the class throughout the entire course of the program.

Program Synopsis

The actual lessons as they were implemented in this study will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 4. However, for the purposes of providing an opportunity to understand how the curriculum program functioned, this section will provide a brief overview of the curriculum as a whole. This program is called *From Adversaries to Allies* (Brown & Madden; 2009); Lyn Mikel Brown designed this curriculum with her colleague Mary Madden through Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a nonprofit organization that currently operates in Maine. In the "about us" section of the organization's website, Hardy Girls Healthy Women stated, "We believe it is not the girls, but rather the culture in which they live that is in need of repair." The mission of the organization is to "raise awareness about their capacity to serve as agents of change, then enlist their action," (Hardy Girls Healthy Women), an ideology that was deeply embedded in the curriculum

program they designed. This program engages girls as the answer to relational aggression, rather than naming them the cause of the problem.

There were nine units in this curriculum program, each of which became a session in this study. The themes in each session connected to at least one of the theoretical underpinnings for this study (see Table 1), although the two frequently intersected. Each unit in the printed curriculum program provided a variety of activity options for facilitators to use with participants.

Table 1

Connection of Themes in Curriculum Program to Theoretical Underpinnings

Framework	Topic	Program Sessions
Critical Pedagogy	Dialogical Strategies: Educational practices that are egalitarian and communicative can promote critical understanding and liberation	Session 1: Participants determine group norms and rules for participating in sessions
	Critical Consciousness: Oppressed come to understand the sources of their oppression and come together to challenge it	Session 1 & 9: Defining ally and importance of creating a coalition; engaging girls as the solution in empowering themselves and one another.
	Divide and Rule: Patriarchical society pits young women against one another in ways that prevent them from unifying against their oppression.	Session 9: Importance of supporting one another to fight against injustices Overarching objective: engage girls as a part of the solution, create opportunities for them to create alliances
	Democratizing Praxis: Banking model of education reinforces hegemonic social order and do education "to" students rather than with them.	Facilitating Strategies: Participants guide the conversation within the themes presented
Feminist Theory	Gender Stereotypes: Notions of femininity socially learned and ritualistically repeated	Session 2: Discussion on gender socialization and stereotypes
	Gender in Media: Women are objectified and constructed as "other" in contemporary media.	Session 3: Activity on how media messages limit girls either by hypersexualization on reinforcing typical "female" behaviors
	Relational Aggression: The ways that girls exhibit meanness and conflict in relationally aggressive ways are reproduced and minimized in contemporary media	Session 4: Discussion on girls aggression portrayed in media and relational aggression Session 7: Activity on cliques, clubs, and exclusion
	Female Passivity: Society relegates less power to women and girls than it does to their male counterparts. Women do not learn to assert themselves as a result.	Session 6: Activities to promote assertive communication and conflict resolution; practice resolving conflict and leaving the dignity of both parties intact.
	Gendered Violence: Women are overrepresented in statistics of sexual violence because they are subordinated and constructed as "other"	Session 8: Participants discuss relationship boundaries; how to define and respond to sexual harassment

The first unit established the ground rules for the program and supportive methods of communication within the group context. The second and third units within the program focused on critiquing cultural messages that are transmitted to girls and by girls. The fourth unit pertained specifically to relational aggression, and it took place at a moment in the curriculum where girls had some opportunities to dialogue critically about society and culture, examining how gender is constructed and reinforced in society at large. The fifth through eighth units discussed the different contexts such as family, cliques, clubs, romantic relationships, and society where girls frequently experience conflicts. These lessons were designed to teach them about using assertive, respectful language that is direct and not relationally aggressive. It was also designed to teach them how to cope with relational aggression. The final unit of the curriculum served as a moment of closure for all that had come before, reinforcing the importance of healthy relationships between girls. The objective embedded within all of these lessons was that as girls begin to interact more respectfully with one another, they are able to unite against the modes of oppression within society that they no longer accept as merely tolerable. By participating in this process, girls were expected to see one another as allies rather than adversaries.

Data Collection

Audio Recordings

In order to provide a deep and detailed look at the experiences of participants in the study, all sessions were audio recorded. These audio recordings began about three minutes before the class began, and they continued until the conclusion of the session. I used either my mobile phone or iPad to record the data, depending on the device that was accessible to me the day that I was conducting the course in this study. The program I

used was called *HD Recorder Plus*, a free downloadable application through the iTunes store on Apple iOS devices. This software was ideal because it automatically transferred audio recordings of the sessions between all the devices that were connected with the same email address. This meant that if one device was lost or malfunctioned, I was able to access the data on any other device that used the same login information. This was ensured the data was available to me whenever and wherever I needed to have access to it.

After the completion of the study, I hand-transcribed the recordings for each day. At first they I transcribed the sessions to record exactly what was said. Then, I applied a second level of description to provide context for what has happening at that time. For example, if a participant laughed, that was noted. If she interrupted another student, or if she raised her hand before I called on her, those details were recorded in case they became important to the data analysis. This process was helpful because it meant that I was going back to the sessions to listen to them multiple times in order to record the interactions as accurately as possible. This enabled me to become familiar with the data and begin to identify themes in the data before I actually began to code it.

Because there were so many voices in the recordings (17 students and my own), coding the data took approximately one hour for every ten minutes of the class sessions that were recorded. Once I had gone through each session twice, it took approximately 10 hours to transcribe each session. The transcriptions of the sessions are kept in a secure and password-protected computer file, to protect participants' anonymity. Additionally, the voice files were removed from all recording devices except one, where the recordings are kept in a password-protected file as well.

Student Work

The second set of data I collected was class writings and assignments. When the project was originally designed, I hoped to institute journals for the girls to write in each class session, in order to record participants' experiences each class day. However, what I did not understand before entering the setting of our classes was the fact that a precedence of not having to complete any "academic work" in ungraded courses. As a result, this proved hard to implement. Instead, the girls recommended that we keep a class "smashbook" (a brand of scrapbooking journal), where their reflections on the day would be recorded. This also proved to be difficult, because the book was small and it was impossible to have the girls all working in it simultaneously. Although there were a few sessions where participants worked in these scrapbooks, the best solution was to bring large pieces of butcher paper to class for each session where the girls were asked to write reflectively. This provided the opportunity for girls to reflect simultaneously and individually on the process. The program provided some other opportunities for the girls to reflect and write, and those writings were recorded. The written work was used in two major ways. First, written work provided an opportunity for the girls who did not frequently voice their opinions in class a different medium of expression. Second, the written work provided an opportunity to triangulate the findings derived from the written recordings with girls' reflections in their own words.

Researcher Field Notes and Observations

In an effort to bring the entire story together, I also kept detailed field notes throughout the course of the study to record my observations and experiences. It was almost impossible to take notes during each session because the class periods went so

quickly, and there were typically more than 10 girls in attendance. There were a few instances where I jotted down ideas during our sessions, usually to capture a word or to make a note to go back and listen to what someone had said. However, for the most part, the field notes were written after each class session. Before the study began, I hoped the field notes would provide an opportunity to remind me of times where girls commented on, articulated, or critically identified an aspect of relational aggression within society, and the field notes evolved to include my own reflections and experiences within the context of the class session. Most importantly, the field notes were the place where I planned the lessons, reflected on the class period, and made notes to modify upcoming class sessions as needed in an attempt to reflect students' interests and optimize their experience in the program.

Coding the Data

Three types of data were collected throughout the course of this study: audio recordings, written work, and field notes. The transcriptions of the recorded sessions were coded for two major phenomena: (a) Critical consciousness, or participants' ability to identify, speak about, and express critical awareness of relational aggression in society, and (b) The ways girls developed practices to address it in their lives. I employed no qualitative data software, and coded all of the data by hand. Spending hours with each session to create the initial transcription meant that I was very familiar with the sessions before I even began coding. Once I transcribed the session, I coded with different color markers and page tabs to begin to identify the major themes that were emerging from the data.

I coded all written class activities and assignments to identify these patterns in how girls talked about relational aggression, its systemic causes, and the contemporary manifestations to understand the transformative impact the program had on girls' ability to speak critically about relational aggression. The written work was compared to the recorded sessions in order to see where major the themes that I identified were reinforced in writing. Finally, my own written reflections in the form of field notes and observation reminded me of the context in which some conversations happened; how I was feeling at the time; and what unexpected things happened over the course of the class period. The field notes provide a bigger picture to exactly what happened during the class periods. Together, these data provided the rich, experiential data needed to theorize about the impact the program had had on girls' critical consciousness about relational aggression and participants' experiences within the curriculum program. They have been included in full in the subsequent chapter.

Objectivity and Bias

As mentioned previously, participatory action research was the method I chose for this study because of its consideration of power, reliability, and self-reflection, which are all central elements to this research. One major limitation present in this study was my relationship to the school site and the student participants. Although these students were not students at the time this study took place, they are now. Knowing that their participation in the program might shape future interactions with me was a limitation of the study to the extent that it may have impacted how students acted and responded throughout the course of this study. Second, the fact that I selected only one of the many curricula available may be considered a limitation to this study. Although I have

provided justification for my selection, the fact remains that there are more curricula that I could have drawn from. My selection of this program might have impacted the outcomes of this study because the results may have been different if I had selected a different program.

The final and perhaps the largest possible limitation for this study was the classroom dynamic that might have been impacted by an inherent power dimension between the students and myself. There is a possibility that this power imbalance may have impacted the way that I perceived the events as they occurred throughout my participation in this study. With that in mind, the participatory action research methodology was an instrumental tool in making an effort to preclude these possible limitations. As I have previously discussed, a true participatory action research model makes an attempt to break down the barrier between researcher and researched so the research is something done *with* rather than *to* the participants. The dissolution of the power dynamics inherent in any research study is one of the underlying objectives of the action research methodology. While I was responsible for planning and implementing the sessions, I made a concerted effort to allow the girls who participated to have flexibility and ownership over the course as the study took place. Throughout the course of the study, I vigilantly attempted to remain mindful of minimizing my role as researcher and embracing my place within the more democratic group.

A limitation of this study was the assumption that changes in students' *conscientization* of relational aggression would be observable, and that I would be able to record these observations in my field notes. But changes were often so nuanced that I did not pick up on them until I had reviewed the data multiple times. If I had considered this

limitation before, I may have thought about other ways to assess for critical consciousness. Generalizability is another obvious, but serious limitation of this study, due to the fact that it took place at only one school site. This limited the ability to apply the findings to other school sites, especially when the demographics of the school are considered. While few schools have the socioeconomic makeup of Oceanside School, the issue of relational aggression is present across many boundaries, and most adolescent girls have at least witnessed relationally aggressive acts. Thus, the goal of this research was to share the findings and recommendations of this study so that other school sites could use this as a starting point for their own participatory action research investigations. Although my own positionality was a potential limitation of this study, I took the time to inform readers of my biases, the theoretical framework that I selected for the research, and my underlying assumptions for conducting this work.

Summary of Research Methodology

This section provided an overview for the study that investigated the question: *In what ways does a curriculum designed to decrease relational aggression among middle school girls impact critical consciousness of relational aggression among the participants?* The qualitative methodology I employed in this study was participatory action research. The study took place at a private, coed K–12 school in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Pacific Southwest, and it included 17 seventh-grade girls enrolled in a compulsory health class during the final trimester of the school year. Data collected included transcriptions of recorded class sessions, classwork created by participants, and researcher field notes and observations. An overview of the data collected are detailed in Chapter 4, the discussion of the data and connection to the

literature appears in Chapter 5, and the recommendations and conclusions are discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This study sought to investigate the experiences of 17 young women as they participated in a program designed to decrease relational aggression among girls in grades six through eight. Relational aggression is a very personal issue to the majority of middle school girls, so it was important that the research process honored their experiences in a way to convey their voices about the manner in which this phenomenon impacts their lives. This participatory action research employed the implementation of the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum program (Brown & Madden, 2009), in conjunction with the school's existing Student Wellness program, during Spring 2013. Seventeen seventh-grade girls participated in this qualitative study, and their experiences in the course constitutes the data presented in this chapter.

The first section of the chapter provides a brief overview of the program implemented. The second section offers a participant composite, which provides a glimpse into the participants in this study. The largest section of this chapter includes a description of the lessons plans using the *From Adversaries to Allies* program, as well as the voices of the young women who participated in the study. Wherever possible, the data has been presented in the girls' own words. The names used here are pseudonyms, in order to protect the identity of the participants. While the actual data entails about 30 pages of notes per session, the data presented here are careful selections that illustrate the two major variables that were the focus of this investigation. The first was critical consciousness about relational aggression, its manifestations, and its systemic causes, and

the second item was strategies for addressing relational aggression as these two things manifested in the data. Where appropriate, researcher field notes and reflections were included, in order to paint a coherent picture of what transpired in this course and my experiences as a participant in the research process. My voice also appears in certain circumstances, where I participated actively in the conversation. The data provides a rich description of how girls experienced the *From Adversaries to Allies* program as it was implemented in this study.

Description of the Curriculum as Instituted

The *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum includes over 30 hours of programming, and choices had to be made about what activities to include in the limited number of sessions implemented for this study. For each lesson, an activity was selected that best illustrated the issue that the class session focused on and that provided a good starting point for discussion. Each session followed a major theme or topic outlined in each unit of the program, to the extent that it was possible. Each session was 45 minutes, and the group met for a total of 10 sessions over the course of 16 weeks. This provided an opportunity to dedicate one session to each of the major themes of the curriculum.

Participant Composite

Seventeen girls consented to participate in this study. Most of the girls could trace their relationships back to kindergarten. Only four of the 17 girls had entered the school during seventh grade for middle school. All of the girls knew one other before the study began. As Lindsay explained, “We are all friends, it’s just that some of us are closer than others.” It is possible, though, that not all of the girls shared this perspective.

Five of the girls either self-identified or were labeled by other participants as members of the "popular" girls' group. This included Sam, Lindsay, Kristen, Maggie, Cathy, and Kara. Of the five girls in this group, there were two sets of "best friends" Sam and Maggie, and Kristen and Cathy. Lindsay had been friendly with both sets of "best friends" since kindergarten, but due to a falling out with Maggie and Sam, who were angry with her for not keeping a secret, when Maggie had confided in her. Lindsay was not identified as a "best" friend to any of the girls, although she was still a member of their friend group. During our sessions, Lindsay was the loudest, and participated the most frequently. Kristen and Cathy were the second set of "best friends" in the group, something accepted as an indisputable fact by the rest of the group. Both girls had high-profile parents in the school community. In my interactions with people outside the study, teachers and parents informally referred to these girls as the "queen bees" of their grade, which was usually expressed in a way that was not complimentary.

The second largest group in the study was girls who were also friends with the "popular" girls, but who did not self-identify as having membership in that group. They included Michelle, Bianca, Zola, Brandi, Mia, Emma, and Kara. Michelle, Bianca, Kara, and Emma were members of this second group who were most vocal. Zola did not participate in the first few sessions, but gradually opened up as time went on. Brandi was another quieter member of this group who did not frequently participate and when she did, she shared tentatively. The other member of this friend group, Mia, was also vocal, but both voiced and appeared to feel a bit distanced from the larger group. She never identified anyone in the larger group as a friend, aside from Annie, with whom she had a

falling out about a month before the study began. She confided this to me after our fourth session because she was feeling hurt that the friendship had ended abruptly.

Annie did not identify, nor was it clear that the others identified her, as a member of either the popular group or the second group discussed above. She was friendly to the other girls within the context of the class and shared her ideas frequently. However, she came and went from class alone and never sat with the same group of girls in the class two sessions in a row. The four other girls in the group, three of whom were non-White, were not members of either group, and they identified as not being friends with the larger group of girls outside of the class. Gloria was Hispanic, and Pearl was Southeast Asian. Both were very reserved in the first few class sessions, but when they participated, they did so eloquently and thoughtfully. They always provided insight that connected back to the main idea of the session, frequently bringing the conversation back to the main point after it had drifted away. Nina was quieter and in all of the sessions, she only participated twice. She would speak in smaller groups when the opportunity presented itself, but she participated sparingly in the large group discussions. The last of the four girls was Shoshanna, who was Persian. Shoshanna participated frequently and did not censor the ideas that she shared with the group. Her interaction with the group was authentic and fearless; and she frequently posed controversial perspectives or provocative ideas. She would also freely use language that some of the girls were more reluctant to use. In each session she attended, she spoke frequently.

Research Findings

Lesson 1 – We're in this Together

The agenda for this class period was to introduce the girls to one another and to orient them to the course, as well as guide them through the process of assent. Since this was a research study, parents gave their consent for their daughters to participate. However, participants had the opportunity to decide if this was something that they really wanted to do. A second goal for this class period was to get to know the girls. Before the session, I only knew a few of the girls' names, from occasions where I had proctored a study hall that included seventh graders. So, for this session I planned to tell the girls a little about my research background and myself, and overview the topics the program would touch upon we were going to discuss. The curriculum program also recommended allowing girls to establish ground rules for the group. Since the program was designed to be discussion-based and free-flowing to the extent that it would be possible, so the program suggested that the girls ought to determine what expectations would be for future group meetings.

"Linking Arms" was the major activity planned for this class period. In this activity, one girl would begin by saying something about herself to the girl next to her. If the girl next to her had that in common, the two girls would link arms. If they did not have that particular trait or feature in common, the girl would keep trying naming other things until they did. Once they established something that they had in common, they would link arms and the second girl would proceed to find something in common with the girl next to her, and so on. Once the entire group was linked together, the girls would be asked the significance of the activity.

The closing activity planned for this class was a discussion that linked the activity to the notion of "creating a coalition of girls." The plan was to ask what a coalition is, what it meant for them, and how they could create a coalition, both within the context of this program and outside in their daily lives. In addition, I planned to ask the girls how they thought a coalition was different from a clique. I also planned to define the word *ally* (a term that the girls are familiar with through their participation in a different antibullying curriculum) in a different context for the purposes of our group. The definition of *ally* in the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum program was "a member of a group or team that can make a positive difference in the lives of those around them." I planned to discuss the characteristics of an ally: taking risks, standing up for someone who has been treated unfairly, speak up, have someone's back, and remember that you do not have to be friends with someone to be an ally to them. The objective was to begin to establish group trust and dialogue between group members.

March 15, 2013

This was the introductory session to the course, and because participants had not provided their assent when the session began, I did not have their permission to record the session. In lieu of their voices for this preliminary session, I have included my field notes for this session in order to help provide a holistic perspective on what took place over the course of the study. All subsequent sessions will focus on the girls' voices.

> What worked: To begin the session, I introduced myself and gave a brief overview of what the girls could expect from their participation in the study. I gave them an idea of what the sessions would be like and the material that we would discuss. Afterward, I explained the assent process to the

participants. There were a few questions about how the group would be managed, and whether the girls could move back and for the between sessions, and a few other hypothetical questions were posed. For instance, one girl asked, “What happens if no one wants to be here?” I was terrified that the girls were going to opt out of the program. After answering those questions, each of the girls decided that she would like to participate in the class.

The activity “Linking Arms” went so well. In this activity, the girls stood in a circle. I explained the objective for the activity-to find something that they had in common with the girl next to them. Quickly, one of the girls said, “This isn’t going to work! I *know you*!” to the girl next to her. Almost immediately, the girls had reorganized themselves so they were standing next to someone with whom they were not already friends.

The activity began slowly, and as we proceeded, the girls continued to establish their own rules about the game, “Okay, no ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions!” The girls were on a roll, and even though we went slightly over time into their lunchtime, the girls stayed to finish the game, laughing heartily at some of the things their friends were asking and answering. It was also very helpful for learning the girls’ names.

The curriculum has a variety of activities that allow the girls to do journaling, if they choose to. So, I mentioned that I would bring a journal for each of the students, to the next class. My idea was quickly overturned by a few of the girls in the group. “We need a Smash book!” Apparently, Smash books are all the rage with 7th -grade girls . . . Who knew? So, I promised I would

purchase a Smash book, which would become the girls' group journal for our next session. I hope that this allows for a collective piece for data analysis, something that I am excited about.

What didn't work. Cell phones appear to be a bit of a problem that I am not sure how to address. Technically, the girls are not allowed to have their cell phones in class per school rules. They know that, and I know that. However, I am using my recording device on my cell phone to record our sessions, so I walked in with mine in hand. The girls already had theirs out when I arrived, so this was not the reason they were present. However, I have mixed feelings about how to approach the situation. I want them to be free of the distractions phones create; however, I do not want them to feel punished. I am not sure if this felt like a bigger issue because the group was so excited and slightly difficult to manage, or if this is contributing to that feeling of lack of group management.

Next time. I need to think of a few strategies to manage engagement and focus in the group. I told the girls that for the next class I would bring a ball for them to pass around the circle to talk. I am going to create a PowerPoint presentation with notes as well, to help organize our sessions and keep us on track."

Lesson 2 – Researching Girl Culture

We ran out of time to complete all the activities planned in the first session. So, for this session, I planned to come back to the closing discussion about defining a coalition, discussing what an ally is, and explaining how everyone in the group has the ability to be an ally to girls, both in and outside of this study. After this discussion on

alliances and how it connected to the name of the program (*From Adversaries to Allies*), I planned to begin the lesson from the program called "Observing Girl World."

The overarching question for this session was, "What kinds of media messages do we see in the world around us that tell us what it means to be girls?" The plan was to engage the girls in a discussion about media images and how they impact girls' sense of self and relationships with other girls. The intention was to show that so many messages in society are presented to us through a gendered lens. To illustrate this notion, I had two images to show the girls: one of a stereotypical female toddler room and one of a stereotypical male toddler room. The girl's room was full of dolls and pink toys and the girl is sitting in a reclined position on the floor, with her ankles crossed. The boy's room was full of blue toys, trucks, and action figures; and he is standing in a superman costume with his hands on his hips, in a very active pose. I intended to use the image to begin a discussion about what media and advertising "sells" to young children from the moment they are born.

The activity planned for this class period was called "Critiquing Girl World" (p. 23). First, I planned to draw a box on the board and ask the girls to write messages that illustrate "acceptable" behavior for girls in society. Once they had a chance to do this, I planned to ask the girls to write unacceptable behaviors for girls outside the box. The purpose of this activity was to get girls to identify social pressures and messages girls receive that tell them how girls should act. There were discussion questions that accompanied this activity, which asked the girls to describe how they feel about "being boxed in," and how people tend to react when girls act "outside of the box."

At the end of the session, I gave the girls an assignment and asked them to bring in images or sayings that they came across after spring break for an activity and discussion on "Media Madness," the third session. I also prepared for this session by purchasing a Smashbook and stickers, to allow the girls to begin work on a collaborative journal.

March 22, 2013

After feeling frustrated and unsure with the flow of the first session, I went back to the *Facilitator's Guide to Becoming a Muse* for guidance. The guide recommends using a "talking stick" to manage talking time and aid with managing the group discussion more seamlessly. I brought a ball full of glitter and water instead, so girls could roll it to one another across the floor. While introducing the glitter ball, I reminded them of our conversation on ground rules. In addition, I mentioned that I would love to have them make an effort to sit next to someone else during each session (another strategy recommended in the *Facilitator's Guide*). After this brief discussion, I moved to the Power Point presentation to introduce the topic for the day (see: Appendix F).

Defining coalition. The first slide said, "What is a coalition?" I rolled the glitter ball to a girl and said, "I have a question for you! What is a coalition?" They all stopped and looked at Sam.

Sam said, "Ugh, a, like, like, a happiness of everyone where everyone is happy!" Another girl tried to interrupt, but a third girl in the group shushed her. Sam continued, "Like, when everyone is on the same side and stuff."

Lindsay said, “So, at the end of that Mean Girls movie. Well, not that Mean Girls movie but at the end of Mean Girls, everyone’s just like swimming and they’re all happy…” she began giggling.

Lindsay rolled the ball to Maggie, who said, “I think it’s kind of like the opposite of like, a clique, sort of. Like, it seems, like, a coalition would be like, where everyone’s, like, everyone’s like, together, like, they’re all in a friend group. Not in like, a clique.”

I said, “Yeah. Ok. Bianca also has an idea. Roll it over to her.”

Bianca said:

> Okay, um, I feel like a coalition is almost like, what-cha-ma-call-it, like a musical where they have the actors and then they have the dancers, and then they have the singers and blah, blah, blah. And then, like, when everyone is singing together, it’s like a coalition, but when they’re like, separated, it’s like not.

A few moments later, Lindsay connected with her idea about why a coalition would be so hard to create at school. She said:

> I think friendship is really complicated because like there’s so many different people in the school and they, like, we’re teenagers, and it’s hard sometimes, because, like, you can be frustrated at home and at school, and everywhere, and you have like, nothing to do, and once you have your friends, it’s I don’t know, it’s like, we’re all teenagers and it’s really hard.

We continued to discuss what a coalition meant, what the opposite of a coalition looked like, and how the girls might go about creating a coalition at school. The girls

seem to connect it abstractly to the idea of safety, which they explained as "feeling a sense of belonging."

Masculinity and power. This conversation quickly turned into talking about whether or not it is easier to be a middle school girl than a middle school boy. The topic of tomboys was introduced and how the girls perceived it was acceptable for girls to act like boys. On the other hand, the girls connected difficulty in being a girl to the tension that a boy would feel, if he did not look or act masculine enough. Maggie spoke to this idea:

> Ok, I think that girls, like already, we have so much—it seems—like, there is a lot more pressure on us and because of that, if a boy acts like a girl, people might judge them. So, not only are they being judged for being a boy and acting like a girl, but we are also being judged for being a girl and acting like a girl because I feel like girls get judged way more than guys do.

As soon as Maggie began to talk, something interesting happened, and there was an energy shift in the group from just seconds before, and girls were listening intently. The conversation continued among a few girls who were typically more vocal, but then I suggested that since so many girls wanted to talk, it might be better just to go around the circle. The girl to my immediate right, Pearl, had not spoken yet at this point, and she shared her thoughts;

> I think the reason why, like, um, like, it's okay for a girl to be a tomboy but it's bad for a boy to be a little more feminine is that, it's because girls stereotypes have been, like, that girls are weak, they like, all they care about is clothing makeup and stuff, and a lot of guys think that's boring. And like Brandi was

> saying, everyone like has a little tomboy side. Maybe they have a sport that they play or do something that wasn't like really ladylike. So, it's kind of in our nature. But like guys, they will like, most guys that I've met and stuff, they don't really like, ever like, want to dress up or, I don' know. So, I think that if for like, a guy like wants to really, likes being girly, it's like a bad thing to other guys because they are like, "Oh, now you're going to be like really weak and weird."

I nodded and said, " I love that Pearl said the word 'weak' because that is often something that boys send to girls, right? That message?" Pearl continued:

> Well, because I don't like that. I feel like it's a little, like, sexist, because, like, for example in the 2012 Olympics, the London Olympics, they saw a girl playing—I forget if she did fencing—was holding the flag. And my brother was like, "Oh my god, why is that girl representing America? Why does she do fencing? That's so messed up!" And I'm like, "Girls can do fencing!" And then my brother just like, "you can't really just stab them with a sword, you're gonna get all hurt and start crying and stuff."

Pearl stopped abruptly and passed the ball to Gloria, to her right. This was the first time Gloria had the opportunity to participate in the conversation as well. She said:

> A lot of people were like, mentioning stereotypes, and I think it's not like necessarily like people's fault. Sometimes it's like religion's fault, like sometimes the religion thinks that way. Like, when you think about it, like, I don't know if I actually believe this. But a lot of commercials, like Legos—they have boys doing it and dolls—they have girls doing it. And so a lot of like, society, influences it a lot. And, did you know that girls Legos are called

> "Friends." Like there's this one commercial where it was like some sort of bike or scooter thing. And you could tell that one of the people riding the bikes was a girl, but I mean, how many times have we seen a guy in a girl commercial? It's more of like if there is something that seems boyish, you think they're probably all boys. Buy you've never seen like—it's more of like for a girl to be in something like a girl commercial than a boy being in a girl commercial. Like at Toys'R'Us, all the boys' section is all blue, and the girls' section is all pink. So, a lot of times it's not people's fault. Like, society influences them to think that way. So, it's not that they think that way, but they are constantly being influenced by sexism.

I responded, "Thank you, yes, you're right."

Michelle was the next to speak. She began telling a story about a girl whom she had gone to school with in the past, and who dressed and acted like a boy. Michelle remembered that sometimes people would call her a boy, but no one thought that was strange. She stated that she thought it would have been different if it were a boy acting like a girl. She said:

> And then, if there's a boy who's dressing up in a dress, if someone would call him a girl, then everyone would start laughing and teasing. And I feel like, well, a lot of what, like Gloria was saying—how society influences us—and like had that never started, I feel like it would be like the same exact thing, where if a boy dresses like a girl, it really wouldn't be that different.

Girls identified how being a boy and acting like a girl means that he is treated more negatively than he would be if he were acting like a boy. The girls commented that when

a girl acts like a boy, that seemed more understandable or acceptable. The conversation that was planned for the day was about how gender is represented and reinforced in society, and the girls came to this discussion, regardless that it went differently than I had planned.

I was also surprised that the girls seemed to have an abstract grasp of the dimensions of masculinity and femininity in society and how each gender is relegated disparate amounts of power. Lindsay spoke to this idea and said:

> If they always hang out with girls, like if they're their only friends. They name them as like, not gay, but they're different. And people are like, scared of different. Like I always, like my godfather is gay, and I think that gay people are so nice. They're always like, the nicest people. And I don't even think it's because they are gay. And mostly, I think, like in the gist of things, it's like; put yourself in, like their shoes. I know if I was like gay, or if I saw the other side of what boys like, I would want like, people to accept me. And so, like, I feel really bad you know?

The girls continued to talk about gender stereotypes for a while, and I started to become worried that we were getting too far off of the point I was hoping to reach—that gender in society is socially learned. However, before I had the chance to take the focus away from the girls, in order to introduce that idea, something happened. Pearl, the girl to my immediate right, signaled for the ball, and Sam rolled it over to her. She began:

> So, I had two comments, and my first one. Um, my first one, that last year there was, like a gay speaker at school. Yeah, and my friend asked him, "When you see a boy wearing a dress people find him gay, but like, but when you see like a girl

> wearing basketball shorts, you don't see her as like a lesbian?" And the speaker said like, it's like, in our history, human history, American history, whatever, it's always been like the man having more of the power, like the girls couldn't vote and stuff. I guess it's like being better, as a man, like I don't know. And it's kind of like, weird to me, I don't know. I don't get . . . I don't get how it's like—we started as cavemen! Like, how did it start with like, man deciding?

She had brought this entire discussion full circle back to the lesson we had planned, adding critical social commentary to what her classmates had said. I said, "That is *so* true!" Pearl added, "And, like, I kind of have like a question about, like, why like—um, how do like, these stereotypes, like get around? Like how do people invent the color pink, decide, oh, it's like a girly shade, that's like really weird." Pearl's comment was the last comment in this discussion, and the girls wanted to talk about these issues so much that I did not have the opportunity to get them started on the "Being Boxed In" activity. However, I think our discussion was powerful for a variety of reasons. First, the girls were able to practice the group norms, which were an important thing for us to do, in order to have more organized meetings moving forward. Second, all the girls except one participated, so they experienced sharing their perspectives within the safety of the group. Finally, I was able to get a baseline reading of how the girls thought about and articulated their awareness of some societal norms and their impact on girls. Since this was a central component to determining the program's impact on participants' critical consciousness about relational aggression, I was glad this came out of the girls' discussions in the first session.

Lesson 3 – Media Madness

Before we adjourned the second session, I asked the girls to bring in examples of gender stereotypes that they came across in the past two weeks. Because I had been working with middle school students for the past seven years, I knew that after two weeks of vacation, it was likely that these girls would forget about this instruction. So, the morning of the third session, I realized I needed a backup plan just in case. On my lunch break, I went to the supermarket and picked up seventeen copies of *Seventeen Magazine* (and it happened to be the summer swimsuit edition). I planned to use the magazines instead of the examples that I knew the girls would probably forget to bring in order to drive our activity and discussion.

This session was designed to create conversations with girls around the idea of media messages that they receive and the impact on girls' sense of self. To start our session today, I planned to give each of the girls a note card and ask the girls to write down the answer to one or both of these questions: *What does media tell us it means to be a girl? And what do we think it means to be a girl?* This activity was meant to assess their entry-level knowledge about the topic informally. I was careful to select a short introductory activity, which would hopefully give us time to complete the activity planned for the session. We ran out of time for the activities that I planned for the previous two sessions.

In the curriculum, the activity for this session is called, "Media Girls and Women: *Says Who?!*" The objective of this activity was to allow girls to look critically at media messages sent to women and teens and provide them an opportunity to discuss the impact of those messages on girls' self esteem and sense of self-worth. The plan was to give

each girl a magazine and an indelible marker. Then, I planned to ask the girls to fold pages, rip out, write notes in, and circle things they saw in order to present one of the images they found to the group and discuss how it made her feel. At the end of this activity, I planned to utilize a variety of discussion questions designed to get girls to think and talk critically about the issues they brought up. I planned on having the questions projected on the projector screen, so girls could speak to them throughout the discussion.

April 12, 2013

This session took place two weeks after our first session because of the school's spring break. I began this session by asking the girls what they thought about our last session, and whether they saw anything that reminded them of the things that we talked about in the time between. A few girls shared some interesting ideas about gender in society.

Reflections on gender. Maggie said:

> So, after I had class, I went to Target. And, so, um, I was just kinda looking and I saw . . . I saw like this picture up on a wall, and I saw like, a boy and a girl, and they were like, playing together. But like, she was the Barbie doll and he was a Hot Wheel. So it was kind of interesting, because it was like, playing together, but they weren't like, playing together.

Kara shouted, "The colors are gender-based!"

Shoshanna added, "Okay, so the other day, I was looking at a magazine do you know Chloe Bates Morritz?" I shook my head to indicate that I did not. She continued:

> Yeah, she's always in these really badass movies. And she, they, she was in this magazine and they were featuring her. And yeah, they put her in some like, frilly

denim vest and like jewelry, and I was like, "*Oh, no!*" I was so angry. You have no idea.

The girls seemed to be developing some language to identify the themes that were distressing to them, and the activity that I had planned for this session was intended to help them continue to develop that vocabulary. I got out the supplies for our session, which included a pile of *Seventeen* magazines. This made them very excited, and when they realized these were for our second activity, they were a little frustrated. It actually turned out to be a great way to get them focused to begin the first activity, so they could move onto the second.

Activity on gender stereotypes. The first activity was geared toward assessing the stereotypes that girls were already aware of in media. I gave each girl a note card and asked her to write responses to these three questions:

Question 1: How do teen and women's magazines portray girls and women?

Question 2: What do they look like?

Question 3: What activities do they participate in?

The girls started answering out loud before they began writing, and then began recording their answers on their cards. Their responses are recorded below in Table 2. After we discussed the media messages that girls were already aware of, I handed each girl a magazine and asked them to identify things that bothered them. The conversations that the girls were having, and the things they were shouting out spontaneously were interesting to listen to (Appendix G).

When they brought their ideas back to the larger group to share, I could really see what they were thinking about the images they were encountering. Here are some of the responses participants shared:

> "Teen Magazines portray girls by potting girls in like pink or frilly glittery stuff. Mags also portray women as sexy or curvy."
>
> "Pretty, happy, skinny, texting, magazines, makeup, jewelry, stuff!"
>
> "Teen and women's magazines portray women as all 'goody goody' and it is not at all like reality. They wear flowery outfits and do things like picnics and girly stuff."
>
> "Perfect images of the female kind, no imperfections. Swimming, cuddling, picnic, beach, by a car, by a palm tree, doing yoga or dance."
>
> "What do women say other women need to look like? Have to be beautiful, have a skinny body. Need to be perfect."
>
> "Magazines portray women as sexy and beautiful. They are dressed in either tight outfits, or very girly dresses or skirts. They often pose in provocative poses. It's all about looks."
>
> "Women always write about problems. Workouts portray that they only care about looks. 'Perfect' stereotypes."
>
> "Teens and women are portrayed as really girly. They do not usually look natural, they look over posed."
>
> "They portray them as perfect girls who are wearing designer clothes, expensive makeup and jewelry, who are trendy and have an unrealistic lifestyle. They do dance or were on varsity sports teams."

Body image. Body image was a topic that was discussed by several girls. Lindsay said:

> So, especially with like the summer time coming. Everyone's like get that hot body and you're going to look super good, just do these exercises. So, let me find it. So there are all these pictures of all these skinny girls. So this is like, [page] 84. There's all these skinny girls, and they're like exercising, but they're still eating yummy foods, looking all thin, and they're going to get skinny really fast. But it's like, that's probably not realistic. Because I know that I've struggled with my weight and stuff. Even though, I'm obviously not fat, I just like struggle with it. And like these kinds of things when I see them, they just kind of make me angry because I feel like they don't work and it's not like a realistic. . . and it's not a typical person if you know what I mean. Like, that's not what everyone looks like. Like, one out of 100 girls will have a perfect body and still like eat everything they want. So this just isn't, like, real.

Michelle built on that idea:

> Well, on this page, there's this girl and um, she's not fat in any sort of way . . . right here . . . but she's not skinny, like all the other girls in the swimsuits like right there or there or there. Um, and it's just really good to have it portrayed where you don't have to be as skinny as a model. But I also don't think it's right to um, cover her up. Um, because I don't think she needs to be. Because she is, like, um, she still is very skinny, and I don't think she. . . . like if you can read it here, it says, make an hourglass figure look even more wow by purchasing a rounder seventies smooth bodice suit so that all guys notice are your awesome

> curves. It's just like you don't really need to hide it or whatever like your problem spots, or whatever. So . . . yeah.

Gloria connected to the idea a bit differently later in the session, speaking about the types of products that are marketed to girls. She said:

> It's just something, like in general, but I noticed that all the ads are either about make up or like skincare or clothing. But again it kinda like refers to like, you like, yeah, it kinda relates back to the idea that the only things girls care about is their appearance. So it's like all the ads, like, even they're like posed awkwardly, it's always about like skincare or makeup.

When Gloria said this, an interesting exchange occurred between Kara and Mia. Kara exclaimed, "It's like, when you read a magazine, you feel really bad about yourself."

Mia countered, "Then why do you read them?"

Kara responded, "Because they're fun!"

Hypersexualization. The idea that the magazines sent messages that the girls should engage in sexual behavior, or embrace being a sex object came up in our discussion as well. Maggie shared her ideas about this and said:

> Okay, so, I kind of found this in two spots, and I know this is kind of weird, but it kind of plays the part, like the idea that we have to be like sexy, or like that girls are like, like that idea. And all the bathing suits, like part of it says like, support our girls . . .And like, all these things, and I know, even if I see bathing suits, a lot of the bathing suits that you find now are like push-up bathing suits. And it's kind of weird that all of the bathing suits are saying like, to show off that

stuff. And all of these are saying, like to do this to look good and stuff. But, it's not always about like, looking good and not like, comfort. And so it it's kind of—there's that.

Annie connected her idea to the photos that girls take of themselves. She commented:

> Okay, so, there's this one that says, *What Guys Think of Your Selfie*. And it says, like the pics you post can speak volumes, find out if you're sending your crush the right message. And it's like there's three different pictures, like three different "selfies." And they tell you like what to change about each one so you can impress your crush. And I think it's like over the top. And I kind of find it annoying that they make a big thing about this. Because if you change a picture of yourself, your crush might start to like you because of a certain pose.

Michelle built on the idea of hypersexualization by saying:

> Okay, so mine, um, okay, so there was like a picture and it's talking about how like the cleavage is showing. And how like, 73% of the people were into that. And there's a lot of different pictures in like a lot of different magazines. And it's not like they're talking about it like straightforward. But it's obvious that they trying to make it, like to show it to guys and stuff. And I think that especially for girls our age and stuff, and a lot of like people who actually have cleavage don't even read these magazines. But for people our age, it's definitely sending the wrong message.

When this session adjourned, I asked the girls to keep an eye out for images that bothered them, which we might be able to connect back to our discussions the next time

we met. The girls were going on a class trip the following week, so it was going to be another 13 days before I saw them again. In reflecting on the lesson, I felt much better about this session, than I had the sessions before. In my field notes, I wrote:

> Girls who have been disruptive in the past seem to be settling down a little bit and taking our time together more seriously. I see this as a wonderful sign that they are becoming more committed to the group, and that they want to make it work and run more smoothly. Some girls who were not speaking to one another in previous classes are sitting together and talking when I walk in, so it appears that a sense of community is arising at this point with the girls in the group. I feel more respected, but also welcome in the group as well, so perhaps the girls are getting used to our space and starting to trust my motive for working with them, that they're not there to purely be watched in this study, but to be engaged in some critical conversations. Overall, I think we are learning a lot from each other at this point. I am frustrated that the girls will be gone again on a class camping trip, but I am excited for the conversations that we will have moving forward. (Field Notes, 12 April 2013)

Lesson 4 – Girlfighting

For this session, the goal was to discuss media messages and relational aggression. More specifically, the activities were designed to explore what kinds of messages magazines, television, and movies send to girls that tell them how they ought to treat one another. To start off this session, I had two clips from the movie *Mean Girls* to show the girls. The activity I planned was to show the clips to the girls and ask them what kind of stereotypical "girlfighting" behaviors were in the first clip, then which

behaviors they witnessed in the second. As girls discussed their reactions to the clips, I planned on displaying some of the dominant messages that media sends about girls and girlfighting. I planned to ask them what their thoughts were about these predominant messages.

Having read Lyn Mikel Brown's book *Girlfighting*, I planned to share some of her ideas about how media shows girls messages about how they ought to behave, particularly how that related to the way they exhibit and resolve conflict. The majority of this class was allocated for discussion of the clips and to provide girls an opportunity to connect the themes to their own lives. At the end of our discussion, I planned to allow the girls to talk about their experiences with girlfighting by telling what happened and how it was resolved. Then, I hoped to look more deeply into girls fighting to talk about how girls fight, why the fight, what they fight about, and the names girls call each other. In closing, I planned to introduce the word "patriarchy" and asking the girls what it means and how it relates to girlfighting.

April 26, 2013

When the girls and I saw each other again, I asked them what their thoughts were on the previous session. Cathy exclaimed, "That was so long ago!" It had been a while, because the girls had gone on the seventh-grade class trip the week before. The session today was planned to talk to girls about stereotypical "girlfighting" behaviors using two scenes from the movie *Mean Girls* (2004).

The first clip I showed was about the girls in the film talking to one another on the phone, exhibiting relational aggressive tactics. At the end of the clip, the main character, Regina George, said to another girl, "Boo you whore!" The girls recited this in unison

with the film. I was beyond surprised! “So, we all know the lines from that?” I asked. “Wonderful, okay, let’s view the other one now.” The girls started recommending clips for us to watch.

“We should watch the one—”

“Oh yeah!” and they were all talking over one another.

The next clip was a confession from Janice who reveals Katie’s (the main character in the film played by Lindsay Lohan) original motives for becoming friends with Regina George, trying to make her feel isolated and angry. The girls were so loud and started talking about the scene. They missed the first few seconds and requested I start it again. At the end of the clip I asked the girls, “Okay, so what stereotypical ‘girlfighting behaviors’ do we see in that first clip when everyone’s on the phone.”

The girls came up with all the correct answers which included: gossip, spreading rumors, talking behind someone’s back, calling names like “whore” and “slut,” and being “two-faced.” This clip made those more explicit and the girls did not have a hard time identifying them. The second clip was more challenging for them. Gradually they came up with the relationally aggressive traits that Janice exhibited in the clip: sarcasm, passive aggressive behavior, turning everyone against her, manipulation, and questioning someone’s sexuality in a way that is intentionally mean and mocking.

I seized the opportunity to talk with them about these things and what they tell us about girlfighting behavior. I asked girls if they thought this was the type of girlfighting behavior that girls typically exhibit and I received three answers.

Lindsay said, “Yeah!”

Sam said, “Not all girls.”

Annie said, “Only girls that want to be popular.”

I brought up the stereotypical idea of a catfight and the fact that media messages about the way girls fight are all over the place. I asked them a few questions, but it was hard to get them to talk about this. They were all thinking and engaged, but they were not participating in the way that I would have liked them to. I asked them if they felt the point of the movie was that girls fight to gain popularity, and if that really happened. Lindsay did not agree with that idea, “I feel like that doesn’t really happen,” she argued. “We don’t fight over popularity and stuff. I don’t know. I mean maybe it like, goes on and I just don’t know it.”

Cathy asked me, “Do teachers know, like, do *you* think there’s like, in our class popular girls?” I answered that I did not really know much about the social dynamics of their grade.

Bianca said, “I’ve been accused of being powerful and popular by a teacher. It was upsetting. She said, ‘I know you have power because you’re, like popular, but you can’t be mean to people.’”

Invalidation. At that point, I directed their attention to a list of stereotypical girl behaviors on the screen and began asking them what they thought about them. One of the girls even mentioned something about boys being more perfect than girls, exactly the point that I was *not* trying to make. Still, the girls were having a hard time connecting to the ideas, until I read the bullet point: Girls’ aggression is a rite of passage. This was an idea they were able to connect to.

Shoshanna said, “Sasha: So, like, my dad was talking to me about that.” The girls started to talk over her, but she waited for them to listen again. She continued, “ My dad

was saying, like girl drama is just a part of middle school, like get over it, it's not a really big deal. And that like, just annoyed me."

Lindsay said, "My mom's like, 'Pull yourself together.' And I'm like, 'Mom, I'm really upset!'"

Michelle mentioned, "My parents think that it's not a big deal. And when I come home, I want someone to like, not agree with me, but then they're like—well, actually—it is."

Annie continued:

> Okay so, like back to the thing with like your parents, like I know like my mom instead of like comforting me, she'll like find a way to be like, "you could have done this better, or you could have done this." And she'll like be screaming at me, and it won't get any better, because she's going to go and tell me like, I'm a terrible child. I was in the car and my mom was like, "you will leave Oceanside without a single friend because you're being like so terrible." And I was like, "you're not hearing me," and it's frustrating.

Lindsay continued, "She's like you can always come to me, and like tell her, and 'she's like gosh darn it Lindsay, you like always do this.' And it's like, okay!"

Emma yelled, "My mom does that too!"

Sam built on this idea that mothers and fathers are sometimes not helpful when it comes to dealing with relational aggression. She made a point that showed how they can even perpetuate it. She said:

> It's about like mothers, but I had a good point, so I was hoping that we could come back to it. I was thinking, that a lot of these things aren't totally true, but in

a way, there's like this essence where some of these things are true, and in a way a lot of these things stay with a person, like even when they're older, like and they're like supposed to be mature, and everyone thinks like, middle schoolers are like *this*, but I've actually had like a mother like act badly towards me, because of a situation with a kid. But I think that it's just some people like, it stays with them no matter how old they get and they still act like that, it's not just a stereotype for middle school.

Lesson 5 – Conflict Resolution

This session was supposed to be a new lesson from the curriculum program; instead, it was a continuation of the last session. In the last session, the girls and I talked at great length about the way girls tend to fight and media messages that communicated stereotypes surrounding girlfighting behavior. During the fourth session, girls identified that many of the ways media portrays girlfighting were a reality for them. The objective for this class session was to help the girls practice skills and develop tools to resolve conflict, emphasizing the importance of leaving the dignity of both parties intact. I needed to remain cognizant of my own investment in this session because this was one of the more important lessons in the curriculum, from my perspective. So instead of lecturing to the girls about resolving conflict or making it personal to me, I wanted to enable them to think of examples of conflicts, how they were resolved, and add onto those skills using a few tools that were introduced in an interactive way.

The activity, "How to Rule our World! Resolving a Conflict" (*From Adversaries to Allies*), was designed to give the girls hands-on actions and skills that they can use to resolve a conflict when they experience it. For this session, I drew on my own

experience as an educator to supplement this lesson with some practical tools that would be helpful to the girls. The activities for this session included a variety of roll-playing scenarios where the girls would act out the following: reframing mean behavior, communicating assertively, setting friendship boundaries, and making good choices in digital communication. My hope was that this session would be lively and full of discussions and that the girls would walk away with some valuable hands-on strategies for dealing with girlfighting (as well as other conflicts) in their lives.

May 3, 2013

The girls had so much energy when I came into the room for this session. One girl spanked another girl and the girl who was spanked yelled, “She’s touching me! She’s trying to rape me!”

I said, “She’s not trying to rape you but she may be sexually harassing you.” After this, I attempted to get the girls attention, but little did I know at the time that this discussion, which I passed off as girls exhibiting silly behavior, would characterize the rest of our session. I told the girls that we were going to talk about how to deal with conflict, and I introduced the first idea of looking at mean behavior differently. The girls were able to give some examples of this and how they had successes with it or situations where this might have helped. It was a great discussion. After this, I introduced the idea of setting boundaries with friends. All of a sudden, the discussion took a completely different turn, and the girls reported a widespread issue with sexual harassment among students in their grade.

Physical safety. Emma began by saying:

> Okay, so we wanted to talk about somebody who has violated space of many of us. And on top of that, they're also a very mean person. Often times, they like to slap me across the face because I say something and they think that they can do that.

I said, "This is an important moment that we're having and we we're going to stop everything and talk about it. Who wants to be the designated spokesperson?"

The girls designated Maggie and Bianca. Bianca began by saying:

> So, let's just start with, today in history. Okay, so someone who sits next to me in history, okay, is very inappropriate, so today, this is him this is me. I scoot my chair, he scoots his chair, I scoot my chair, he scoots his chair. And then, I turn around, he grabs my hair, I look at him, and I turn back around, and he touches my bra strap and then is like, I feel your bra strap.

I asked if she told the teacher. Bianca responded, "I didn't." She added no further explanation.

Cathy yelled, "We're telling you!"

Sam said, "It happens so much!"

Mia explained why the girls chose not to say anything by saying the boy was typically treated unfairly by the teacher already, so that the teacher would have reacted very poorly. I responded by saying:

> I'm getting mixed messages right now, I'm getting messages that say that this person is an adversary to us and we don't trust him, and we don't want him to

touch us. And then I have people who are saying, this is how the teacher is mean to him and we're on his side. So I'm a little confused right now.

Maggie took the opportunity to clarify by saying:

> Okay, so the thing is that he's a friend of all the girls because we're all like friendly towards him. But then he, I thinks, he thinks that I think that, like, because we're friends, that he takes it too far, and that's when like many different ways, he takes it too far on a meanness level, where he thinks he can say things to us because we're friends. And he takes it on an invading privacy, like I know I'll text him on the bus sometimes, and he'll be reading my text messages, and can I like demonstrate on Bianca? (*Bianca volunteers*) And then he'll like play with my bra and I'll be like, okay stop, and it's just very, very, very uncomfortable.

Lindsay chimed in and said:

> One day, he like came up to me, because – It's kind of like, building on what Maggie said, but also last year in sixth grade he used to play basketball with my friend's boobs, and he used to throw things into my friend's boobs. And he'd say, "Oh look, it's a free shot," and he'd throw it into, like, her boobs. And then—

The girls started to talk over one another and I could not hear what they were all saying at the time. All I heard was one girl exclaim, "Ew! Tell her that!"

> I heard one girl say, "I can't even count how many times he's grabbed my butt."
>
> Another girl yelled, "He's grabbed my butt so many times!"
>
> A third says, "He's even put his face in between my boobs."
>
> Maggie says, "He calls Bianca 'boobs.'"

At this moment, I was experiencing complete internal panic, but I took a deep breath and said:

> Girls I just have to tell you because I need to tell you this, and I don't know if you remember this because we talk like friends sometimes, but if you tell me something and I feel like someone is making you unsafe, I am responsible to address that issue.

Some girls were not comfortable with the conversation, it was also clear that some girls were angry with the girls who were sharing their experiences, so I needed to divert their energy while honoring their worries. At that point, I decided to have the girls who wanted to talk to me stay after class, and I committed to talking to them as long as needed, in order to help them feel the issue was resolved. We spent the majority of this session discussing this issue. After a few girls asked questions, and a few others made statements both in the person's defense and to share ways they had been violated by him, I transitioned to the closing activity.

I almost absent-mindedly directed the girls into the next activity because I was so upset by what they had reported to me. The activity was to work in small groups on a Smashbook page that captured the ways that girls were mean to one another. It was interesting how quickly they stopped talking about the conversation we had been having, and transitioned into talking about the next activity. Kristen began singing a Lady Gaga song and the girls started humming along. They organized themselves into groups and began working on their pages (See Appendix H).

Reporting issues of safety. After the lesson, I was terrified. I ran to the administrative office to see if there was an administrator available. None were. I asked

the high school dean what I should do because I had middle school girls reporting sexual harassment. She advised me to record it and write down everything they said. She said to bring the notes back to the administration, and they would deal with it. I ran back to my classroom. I felt like I should record the session, but I didn't because I was not sure if I could, as this discussion would officially fall outside of the realm of my study.

I sat with the girls, let them talk about their experiences and asked questions to gain more information. We talked for over an hour and, at the end of our meeting, when I felt like I had enough information to bring back to the administration, I told the girls that if this happened on the bus on the way home that day, they needed to say, "Stop, do not touch me. If you touch me one more time, I will report you to a teacher." I hoped this would keep them safe on the bus ride home, while the administration gathered information and attempted to address the issue on their end. After our meeting, I reported the events to the head of the middle school, and he assured me he would deal with it quickly and efficiently. I was pleased that he did, and on Monday morning, the student implicated was meeting with the administration and his parents about this issue. The girls were aware that this happened, as it is a small school, and information travels quickly. I felt pleased they knew the issue was being addressed, and that they were able to see how quickly an issue could be addressed—if they felt brave enough to speak out about it.

Lesson 6 – Family

This session was a lesson selected directly from the curriculum. It was built meaningfully on the theme of conflict resolution that the girls engaged during the last session. Many teen girls' lives are characterized by conflicts with their families as well as with their friends. Because of this, it is important to draw girls' attention back to the

family as a source of support and stability during adolescence. Resolving conflict with the people closest to us is an important strategy, so this session builds on many of those ideas in a different context.

The central activity planned for this session was a role-playing activity called, "Working it out" (*From Adversaries to Allies*). The goal of this activity was to place the girls into groups and give each group a scenario. These scenarios portray a variety of hypothetical family conflicts. The girls in each group were asked to read the scenario they were given and think of how they could resolve the situation. Girls acted out the scenarios in front of the group and discussed how the situation was resolved. My role in this activity was to remind girls to reflect on some of the language and ideas covered in the last session: the use of "I" language, making a request that the other person can act on immediately, and leaving the other person's dignity intact.

In closing, another smaller activity was planned, "Feeling Good About Me" (*From Adversaries to Allies*), which was designed to help girls identify and share positive characteristics about themselves. Because the last three activities focused on negative and stressful aspects of being a teenage girl, this activity was brought in to get girls to focus on the positive things in their lives as well. In this activity, girls were to be asked to list the following: "qualities I like about me," "people who support me," "what I like about school," "things I love to do," and "things I like doing with my family."

May 10, 2013

This session began much like the previous session, with girls laying on the floor, some on top of or next to another. One girl was sitting on top of another girl, and she complained that the girl would not get off. I prompted her and asked what she should say

if someone was making unwelcome physical contact with her. The other girls jumped in and said, “Stop, do not touch me. If you touch me one more time, I will report you to a teacher.”

Experiencing closure and safety. Since something quite traumatic and serious happened in the previous session, I felt the needed to come back and check in with the girls to see how they were doing. Sam began by saying:

> Well, something that I thought was, like, good, from the end—but people started like telling the boys who was at the meeting. I don’t know honestly, but I was one of the people who talked to the principal. And Spencer is one of my good friends, and he knew because people had like spread rumors about that, and he knew I was one of the people. And I was able to like, talk it over with him, he understood why I felt like that. And I talked to him and he said it was okay and he knew that my intentions were to do a good thing for everybody.

Maggie picked up on her idea and said:

> Well, so, on Tuesday there were people who aren’t in this class, weren’t at any of the meetings, and who were telling a lot of people about this and like saying things and talking about people. And I got really offended. People like came up to me and were like, “Oh, so do you know about the whole Spencer thing?” And I sort of like, acted I was, I sort of not feeling guilty, but I sort of was because he was a good friend of mine. I was feeling a little bad. So I that obviously didn’t make me feel any better. And then um, Allie told me, I said to her that I’m feeling a little guilty and her and Bianca were really helpful and said, "We went and talked to Spencer and we think you should too.”

So, I went and I said, you know, I like, I was there and I was in, like we weren't like targeting you or anything. And we were told that you weren't going to get in trouble. And I explained it to him and he said that it was fine. But I felt really bad because there were things that people said that he did, that a lot of us knew that he didn't do. And that might have just been, maybe just perceived the wrong day. And he was like saying, "Did I really do that?" And I just felt really bad and then I started feeling, I was still thinking about it. And I think that today, like, I think he seemed fine today.

I said:

> Yeah, I mean from a practical standpoint, it's great that he feels great now, but it's more important that the people who didn't feel safe now feel safe. I mean, safety is a big picture, and there are so many things that go into that, and trust is a big one. I feel what Maggie is saying is a really important thing that I'd like to take into consideration too. Because, basically what Maggie is saying happened is that we had a conversation here that left this space. And we lost control of it, right?

Michelle said, "Well, nobody in here told." I continued, "I think there were people that were here told their friends that weren't here."

Emma agreed, "People told their friends."

Cathy wanted to continue talking about her experience since the last session, so I told the girls we could come back to the trust component. Cathy said:

> Okay, well, I want to say what I got out of this experience was, like to stand up and like, for like what you believe in because after the whole thing happened and everyone kind of knew about it. Um, this person, um, like to me and like a group

> of girls said like- it was a guy and he was like, saying like, oh like, we're Spencer's friends, and it was sad because half the stuff people said wasn't true. And, like, what I did was I stepped up for myself and like everyone, and was like, did you ever have a problem with him? So, what I got out of it was just because you don't—like everyone else didn't hear the whole story—or what we personally talked about. Then I think you should stand up for what you believe in.

Lindsay wanted to build on her idea, "Yeah, I think that like, as we've gotten older, it doesn't have much to do with age, because that happened when we were younger too. But like we don't really understand the importance of having, like boundaries."
I nodded in agreement and she continued:

> Like, I think that some people don't think about the consequences. Regardless of if it is someone doing something inappropriate, like in this scenario. And it doesn't have to do necessarily with what is going on, because I'm friends with the person also and I've never thought of it as something that was super bad. But, regardless I think that people have stopped taking the consequence into consideration. You just do something. And you're not thinking about what's happening. But then later, you're like, "oh that was so stupid and I don't know why I did it," and that's because you don't think. It takes so many bad experiences to realize that the consequences are real, and I feel like we have those experiences—I know I've had so many experiences, where I was just sort of stuck, and like with the consequences I guess, and I think that people will eventually realize that you need boundaries.

Providing closure within the group was an important thing to do before moving on, because I needed to make sure the girls felt the issue was resolved and they felt supported. I was so impressed with the way the administration dealt with this issues, swiftly and efficiently, standing compassionately with the victims, as needing to feel safe and supported, as well as the perpetrator, needing to be taught alternative ways of conducting himself. Even the way the girls expressed their interactions with the perpetrator himself after the incident was quite remarkable to me, both because the girls felt safe confronting him and because he did not lash out negatively against them afterward.

Confidentiality within the group. Mia had been waiting for awhile to speak, and she surprised me when she said:

> Ok, so this is like about how it all spread. How everyone found out about it. Um, and so I want to say that it's partially my fault for it spreading because well, while we were in here talking, Brittney was wondering where I was and I told her I was in a meeting. And she wanted to know, like come because she didn't know what it was about. And then I knew she wasn't with Spencer because I've never seen her with Spencer. So then, I was like, "It's just about Spencer and how . . . and like someone else was on her phone at that time when it came in, so that's how it all spread."

I started to say something I did not entirely believe and said, "I mean, that's okay. You didn't know what you were doing, and you didn't do it to be—"

I was relieved when Lindsay interrupted me, "And it's not like you did something wrong!"

I was surprised when she said that, and that Kristen added, “Yeah it s not your fault. Like you didn’t try to do it, so it’s not.”

Lindsay continued, “It’s not like we did anything wrong.”

I thanked her for being honest and said, “But I love that you said that though, because if someone else was thinking that someone else did that behind someone else’s back, that makes it really clear.”

Shoshanna nodded in agreement and said, “Sometimes it’s just easier to tell the whole story.”

Resolving conflict. After the discussion about confidentiality in the group, we had spent a little more than half of our time together for the session. I asked the girls to transition into an activity where each group was given a scenario, which represented a conflict, and they were asked to act out the solution to that scenario. As the girls presented their skits, girls were able to compliment or critique things they did or said, but it was left up to me to fill in a majority of the conflict management strategies that were supposed to come out of the skits the girls presented, which was something I was trying to avoid doing.

When I believed the girls had gotten too far away from the goals of the activity, I asked them to summarize the main takeaways from the activity. Bianca began by saying, “Okay, so when you are fighting or, like you want something, you have to stay calm. Don’t lash out at people and just handle the situation slowly.”

Allie added, “You have to be, you can’t be too, you have to be assertive enough without being, they will feel attacked, but you also can’t be like, it might be a problem. You have to like say what you feel without taking it too far.”

Cathy said, “Well it depends, but come up with a compromise.” They were all correct, but some of the major ideas and strategies that I shared with them included using “I” language, listening to the other person in the conflict, and agreeing to speak to the person face-to-face in order to resolve the conflict. Stepping away from a mobile device when emotions were flaring up due to the sometimes-ambiguous nature of an electronic message was an important strategy we discussed as well.

Lesson 7 – Moving Beyond Cliques and Clubs

The plan for this session was to talk about groups and cliques on campus. The goal was to talk about some tendencies girls have in organizing their friendship groups, and share their experiences with being both an insider and an outsider. The previous session was a great one because it was the first group session where each of the girls participated at least once. In other sessions before, there were at least two girls who did not participate. Although this meant it was a little messy and challenging to manage at some points, as the *Instructor’s Guide to Being a Muse* said it will be when you relinquish some of the control over to a group of girls, it was a successful session in that it appears that girls are started to recognize the space as a place where they can share their ideas and voice their experiences.

I was very excited about both of the activities that were planned for this session because I had experienced using these activities before, in other small group contexts. The first activity “Barnyard” (*From Adversaries to Allies*) was an activity where each girl was secretly told the name of an animal. In the game, only one girl was given the animal *cat,* many girls were given the animal *cow,* and a handful of girls were given the animal *dog*. Once the girls all had their animal, they were asked to close their

eyes and make the noise that the animal would make. Without saying anything other than the animal sound, they needed to find the other people in the room who had the animal that they were assigned. The object of the game was to recreate a feeling of finding a friend group at school, camp, or in the community, and illustrate how that experience might be different for different people. With one girl being a *cat,* and the rest having at least one other person who was the same animal, one was left without a group. After the activity, we debriefed how that activity connected to the girls' lived experiences.

The second activity was also designed to connect directly to the type of grouping and labeling that can be characteristic of girls' relationships with one another. The purpose was to illustrate how quickly we label others, and how we are often incorrect when we do so. In this activity, the girls were told about two different hypothetical girls and were presented a list of characteristics about those girls. The girls were asked to think about how they would describe those girls based on that list of characteristics. Then, they were asked to list the labels they would give to the girls anonymously on the board next to each name. After this activity, I planned on debriefing by discussing how and why the girls came up with the labels that they did for each girl, and discuss how it related to their lived experience.

Based on my previous discussions with the girls, I expected this session to be insightful and powerful for them. These girls all come from a variety of backgrounds that are quite privileged. Although some sessions like Session 4 on Girlfighting were less resonant with the girls, I had observed some labeling, stereotyping, and generalizing within the group that led me to believe that this particular issue is one that is quite

personal to them. I hoped that they would be able to use the discussions and activities in this session to take some practical, transferable lessons away from this session.

May 17, 2013

Fortunately, the girls were becoming more and more willing to participate in the group, which made activities like this one less of a challenge. The fact that the "Barnyard" activity was so kinesthetic and the girls would be moving noisily around the room made me a little nervous. Sometimes, it was hard to refocus their energy when I planned more interactive activities. Because of this, I was a bit nervous about the introductory activity. Luckily, it was not only executed perfectly according to plan, but also the girl who played the role of the *cat* was well liked by all of the girls in the class, which made the subsequent discussion go very smoothly. Cathy was friends with the more popular and outgoing girls who were also members of the group, but this particular girl was more gentle and reserved. When she spoke to her experience within this activity, she was able to command the group of girls with gentle, focused leadership.

Once the girls had formed their two groups (the large group of *cows* and the smaller group of *dogs* with one *cat* still unable to find a group), I asked the girls to open their eyes and sit in their small groups. They responded by noting that the *cow* group was very large and that the "poor" *cat* was all by herself. I asked the cat to speak to her experience and tell the group what it had been like for her, what she was thinking during the activity, and what she thought about it after the fact.

Transitioning into the second activity was much easier than I thought it was going to be. The girls were showing so much focus and desire to contribute positively to the group today. This is perhaps the most organized I have seen these girls, within the

context of our sessions. I explained the next activity briefly and I explained why we were going to do the activity. I wrote the two names of the girls on the board in the classroom and listed some characteristics below each of their names. I changed some of the characteristics to make them more relevant to the girls within the group, based on what I know about the community where I live and work. For each of the girls, I wrote the following descriptions:

Tamika— 1.) Teachers love her, 2.) Her dad is the mayor, 3.) Artistically talented, 4.) Mom is a lawyer, 5.) Pretty, 6.) Nice friends, 7.) Nice clothes, 8.) Big, nice house.

Janie— 1.) Dad is an alcoholic, 2.) Has many boy friends, 3.) Smoke cigarettes, 4.) Divorced parents, 5.) Wears baggy and boyish clothing, 6.) Gets decent grades, 7.) Doesn't participate in class, 8.) Not widely liked by her teachers.

I gave the girls two minutes to write whatever came to mind for them as I was describing each girl on the board in the classroom. The stereotypes and labels that the girls gave to each of the hypothetical girls are shown in Table 2, below.

Table 2

Participant Responses in Tamika and Jamie Activity

Tamika	Janie
Perfect	Badass
What every girl wants to be	What every girl doesn't want to be
Perfect	Maybe misunderstood
The ideal perfect girl	Does not care what other people think
Popular?	Happy
Hated	Thought of as a non-threat
Popular	*Skitch* (means both *skank* and *bitch*)
Lovely	*Sloot* (slang for *slut*)
Has it all	Troubled
Stereotypical "popular"	Trying to escape
	Rebel
	Bad upbringing
	Seems to be against society
	Doesn't care what others think
	Troublemaker
	Outsider
	Doesn't know
	Troubled, Struggling, & Forgotten
	Rebel
	Trying to be a "bad girl" to fit in.

According to the *Instructors Guide to Being a Muse*, moments like this are great for instructors to authentically and respectfully challenge what the girls have identified, and the girls in the group could not have set the stage more perfectly to do so. I gave them a few moments to read what they thought about each of the girls on the board. A few of them spoke up to clarify what they meant by what they had written. Once they had the opportunity to do that, I asked the girls if they could identify any issues with what they had said about each girl, based on the fact that they had never met either girl. One girl raised her hand to speak about how problematic she believed it was that the girls readily, easily, and willingly labeled each of the girls based on the limited information they had about each individual. A few girls were able to connect to what the girl said, both as perpetrators and as targets of labeling.

I disclosed to the girls that I had more in common with *Janie* when I was a teen than I did with *Tamika*, and that many girls I knew had labeled me in much the same manner as the girls had labeled *Janie*. In closing, I asked the girls to be more considerate about the labels that they attribute to other girls, recognizing that, in doing so, we limit our ability to really come to know people who might otherwise have become a great blessing in our lives. I asked them to think about that for the rest of the idea, over the weekend, and whenever they find themselves being so comfortable labeling other people. This was the first time that, as I dismissed the group, the girls were pensive and thoughtful as they thanked me on their way out the door.

Lesson 8 – Sexual Harassment and Healthy Dating Relationships

The topic for this session was sexual harassment. Because the fourth and fifth sessions were derived from one unit of the written program, this lesson was designed to combine two pertaining to girls' relationships with boys and men. This class took place on a special day at Oceanside School, where students were able to bring their loved ones such as grandparents and families to school for a day of performances and festivities. On this day, teachers hold typical lessons (that is, they attempt to). When I realized that our second-to-last session was set to fall on this day, I felt a bit frustrated, but I opted not to cancel the class because so many of the girls that I was working with passed me on campus that week saying, "I can't wait until class on Friday," and "Can we *please* still have class on Friday?" One girl even asked, "Can my grandpa come to class on Friday?" I had to politely say that I don't think that was a good idea, but I resolved to hold class and plan for a typical class session.

The next lesson in the *From Adversaries to Allies* curriculum was a unit on sexual harassment in middle schools. The interesting thing about this lesson was how much the girls had learned about sexual harassment already as a consequence of their participation in the program. Additionally, I had come to be reminded of how girls of this age frequently experience sexual harassment in their real lives. My experience in these conversations was both unsetting and deeply troubling. The fact that so many of the girls that I was working with had been directly impacted by sexual harassment, largely at the hands of only one male student, left me feeling deeply saddened for them. My feelings of frustration were rooted in their being forced to learn a lesson about being a woman in a male-dominated world in ways that impacted their feeling of personal safety that was a bit traumatic for some. On the other hand, it is my belief that through these conversations, the girls gained some deep understanding about boundaries, advocating for themselves, and supporting one another when sexual harassment happens. Some of the girls were even aware of how the disciplinary procedures are carried out when acts of sexual harassment are committed and reported.

This learning experience began to unfold during Session 4 on Conflict Resolution, where I began talking about strategies for assertive communication. In the session where the girls reported sexual harassment, we were discussing the importance of setting boundaries and feeling safe in friendships. Suddenly, the session turned, and the girls were collectively speaking about a series of incidents where they had felt violated by a boy who was also a student at the school. What transpired after this incident was a full-fledged investigation involving interviewing girls individually and, as a group, collecting data, and eventually presenting that information to the administration who acted swiftly

and broadly to make sure the girls who had reported the harassment were protected from future harassment and retribution.

This incident was a valuable lesson because a facilitator for a program like this one, where students have the power to voice their opinions and experiences, must have knowledge about how to get help for participants, if they need it. The *Instructor's Guide to Being a Muse* does say that when girls feel comfortable in the group and perceive it as a safe space, they will begin sharing their actual experiences. In knowing that, it is important for facilitators to be aware of how to access help for girls when issues like this do come up. In reflecting on the experience of recording, reporting, and reacting to actions of sexual harassment that the girls had experienced, I cannot imagine how difficult or frustrating that process could have been, if I had not been a member of the organization with the ability to immediately seek out people who could help. Only three days passed from the initial report to the administrative resolution, which was an incredible way to validate the girls for being brave enough to come forward, make them feel listened to, and make them feel safe at school again. Because this issue was dealt with swiftly and seriously, I strongly believe that any of the girls who were involved will feel safe and empowered enough to report actions of harassment if it ever happens to them again.

The last encounter where sexual harassment was the topic was a very reactive discussion. The girls came forward with something that was already an issue, needing help with it. Many of the girls who participated in this discussion did not understand how and why what was being done to them was harassment. Others were angry and upset by the fact that some girls were reporting the incident to a faculty member. All of the girls

in the group had a limited understanding of why it was characterized as sexual harassment at that time. During this session, I hoped to address the issue more proactively, speaking to girls about what sexual harassment looks like, and what can be done about it in greater detail. My hope was that this session would enable girls to develop the awareness to identify acts of sexual harassment and have a better idea of how they could deal with it personally, but also know when to seek help.

May 24, 2013

This session was brief enough to include the entire transcribed session. When I entered the room, there was a pile of girls on the floor, squealing and laughing heartily. I laughed and asked, “What is happening here?!”

One of the girls exclaimed, “It’s Friday!”

Another said, “Everyone’s gone!”

A third yelled, “I’ve had sooooo much sugar!”

Once I sized up what I would be working with for a moment, I quickly decided that we ought to sit in a circle of desks. I hoped that this would bring a little more focus to the group than I was originally seeing. Typically, they would have fought me on this because they really love sitting on the floor and leaning on one another, but they seemed to be so giddy and deliriously happy that they contently plopped into the chairs one by one as I moved them into the circle, continuing to chatter and laugh.

I asked one of the girls to help me pass out a resource; it was a handout on sexual harassment. Once it looked like we were going to get started, one of the girls remembered seeing my husband and me at dinner a few nights before and wanted to talk about that. We spent a few minutes talking about how they thought my husband was

going to be tall, dark, and Italian. They were surprised that he isn't. One girl said, "I would never picture you with a guy that is blonde." I laughed and agreed, saying I never knew I would end up with one either.

One girl asked how he proposed. I say, "In a canoe--in a red canoe, in a lake with lily pads..." and the girls started squealing and cooing. I finished, "Just like the little mermaid."

I tried to draw their attention back to the handout on sexual harassment I had handed out to them as one girl started talking about doughnuts. Another girl said that she hates it when people tell her she has food on her face while she's still eating. A third said that she hates the color copier because the pages are so slippery and hard to write on. I took that opportunity to attempt to segue way into our conversation and get them focused on the handout.

I realized that I needed to take more control and said, "Anyway, this is what I wanted to talk to you about today. It is the next lesson in the program."

I told the girls that it had been funny how different things have come up, which were a part of the curriculum but how they came up out of the sequential order that the program sets forth. This topic had already come up, and I told the girls we were going to get back to it in a later session. It would have been nice to follow the girls' discussions as the primary guidepost and use the curriculum to meet their needs, despite it being presented out of the sequential order. In the future, this is something that definitely could have improved the overall effectiveness of the program.

I asked them, "Why do you think, if sexual harassment is illegal, why does it happen? And if it's illegal, why does it happen in school?"

Bianca said, “I think that happens because people aren’t sure and they don’t know what they’re actually doing, like how bad it is. And I think they’re just uneducated about a lot of things.” Emma agreed:

> I think going along with what she said, I think some people just don’t understand because they’re, like, joking around so they don’t get that what they’re doing is, like, actually inappropriate. I mean, since a lot of times, people, girls, are like, “you know what, that’s sexual harassment. Stop.” A lot of times girls are like, “OK, whatever.” They, like, walk away. So a lot of times they don’t really realize the extent of what they’re doing.

I asked another girl what she thought. Sam replied:

> Um, two reasons. I think one might be that it might have happened to them before. Or maybe they didn’t quite understand what is happening. And the second reason was kind of like the same as what these girls said, that they probably don’t know that poking a part of a girl’s body is considered as sexual harassment.

I asked Kristen what she thought. She said, “A lot of the time a girl thinks, kind of what Alana said, like it meant nothing. Then, a lot of times, maybe they think that they wouldn’t get caught. Cause it’s like, I don’t know.”

Lindsay said, “ They think it’s funny and they think they’re being cool. So, they’re like . . . in my sister’s year. I don’t know if it’s really a secret but. . . . ” She stands up and shows what boys in her older sister’s grade do to the girls. She says, “I don’t know what they think, like if it’s cool, or if it’s like, flirting, but it’s like really creepy and, like, sexual.”

Bianca chimed in, "The 8th graders have a way worse version of that game. They start from the shoulder and they go . . . ." She gestures with her hand, moving toward her chest. "And they like . . . ugh!" The girls started to giggle.

I asked, "Why do you think girls let that happen? That game?"

Pearl said, "Because they are afraid to speak up because they guys will be like . . "

Bianca talked over her and said, "Ugh! Such a wimp!"

I asked, "Is it weird to think that some of the girls kind of like the attention?"

Lindsay shouted, "That's what I was gonna say!"

Emma says, "Girls love that attention, that's just how we are."

Mia said:

> We want that attention because we obviously are like, "I don't want attention." But we always want attention. Yeah. And um, so I think that's like, everyone wants attention, but then if you say something, like "Stop," then they're like, "That's annoying" or "Oh my God, like . . . " she stops because Kristen and Sam were at something.

I asked her to continue, but she says, "I got distracted." She giggled and stopped talking. Kristen said, "I wasn't doing anything."

I asked Sam a question. She responded:

> I was gonna say, like girls like to do that kind of stuff because they get attention from the boys. Like, because usually, the girls sometimes don't give attention to girls. And like, if a girl likes a guy and if he doesn't necessarily give her like attention, but then he does then she digs that.

Pearl commented:

> Umm—some people, I think some—like, some people think like, it's better to have negative attention than no attention at all. Like, let's say you're a girl and everyone kind of ignores you, but then it's like guys are acting all sexual and stuff. That might be like, you or that person might be happy because at least someone is paying attention, no matter if it's positive or negative.

To Pearl's credit, she was able to complete her thoughts, regardless of the fact that the other girls had begun howling with laughter as she was talking. I asked a clarifying question, "So, are you saying that this especially happens when a girl feels insecure."

Just as I ask this question, the girls broke into spontaneous song, singing *You Don't Know You're Beautiful* by One Direction. The lyrics were relevant, to their credit, "You're insecure, don't know what for. You're turning heads when you walk to the door. Don't need make-up."

I said, "This is actually a really appropriate song to be singing right now." Hoping to stop it and talk about why, but they didn't stop. They started singing about each of the girls in the group. They were laughing so hard that some of the girls were falling out of their desks.

I said, "I love you. You have had too much sugar, and you are going to put the resource "What is sexual harassment and what can I do?" in your backpacks."

They were having too much fun to hear me. I asked Lindsay to help me quiet the girls down. Once they were paying attention to some extent, I asked if we could quickly read the handout about what common sexual harassment happened in schools.

Once they began to settle down a little bit, I started reading through the handout I had given them, which includes a the list of common sexual harassment that occurs in

schools. There was giggling again, and one girl started acting out each of the acts of sexual harassment on the list. The girls were absolutely howling with laughter. I let it slide and tried to continue, until I got to the item on the list which mentions "removing other's clothing or your own," then I thought better of it before continuing on. Sam was ahead of me, though and she had already joked about pulling off her shirt. At this point, I realized we were not going to have a successful session, and I told the girls to have a great weekend. They didn't miss a beat, and darted out of their desks then rushed out the door, laughing.

Lesson 9 - From Adversaries to Allies

The topic for this session was "Building Alliances." The plan for this lesson was to have girls reflect and talk about their overall experiences in this class. To honor the PAR methodology for this study, gaining feedback from the girls on their experiences in the program was a central component to the research design. The objective was to provide an opportunity for girls to reflect on their time in the course and say what they remembered, what they liked, and what they think now about each session we had at this point in the course. The plan was to have the girls reflect individually, but I had a difficult time thinking of how I wanted them to share their feedback.

After some thought, I decided it would be best to have the girls brainstorm on large pieces of butcher paper in order to write the answers to each of the three questions I asked (what they remember, what they like, and what they think now). Around each sheet of butcher paper, I printed out the Power Point presentation for the day. The purpose of this was to remind them of the activities and discussions we had had each day, as well as the objective for each session. Once the girls had time to go around the room

and reflect on the classes, writing their ideas on the paper, we would come back together to have a large group discussion.

The discussion questions were designed to determine how the girls experienced the course, and whether or not the connection between relational aggression and the societal issues we discussed was explicit to them. The goal of the curriculum was to engage girls in discussions and activities centered around understanding systemic issues: gender bias in media, stereotypes about gender and behavior, and messages about girlfighting, in order for them to think about relational aggression in their own lives differently. If the consequence of participating in a patriarchal culture that grants girls less power and agency than it does their male counterparts is dividing girls and pitting them against one another, which manifests as relational aggression, engaging critically in discussing those issues would ideally help girls develop strategies to think differently about relational aggression. I hoped our discussion would assess the girls' ability to make those connections and make them more specific if I needed to.

May 31, 2013

The evening before this class session, I received an email message from the director of the theatre department saying that over half of the girls who are participating in the study will not be in attendance due to tech rehearsals for the musical, which begins that following evening. As promised, less than half of the girls who had committed to participate in the study were present the next day. I explained the activity to the girls, and they got to work right away. They went around individually, writing down their reflections about how our sessions went. These were their responses to their experiences in each session:

Session 2: Becoming an Ally
What we liked:
Glitter Ball
Everyone got to share their comments

What we remember/ think now:
To have courage to be an ally
Taking Risks
Having each other's backs
Don't be afraid to speak up.

Session 3: Girl World
What we liked:
Talking about the kind of messages we see in the world
Talking about stereotypes

What we remember/think now:
Talked about how society divides boys and girls
Don't stereotype
Everything for the girls was pink and everything for the boys was blue.
I never really noticed the messages!

Session 4: Media Madness
What we liked:
Using magazines to show "media madness"
Using magazines for "evidence"
I liked using the magazines because it is a source of entertainment we usually see.

What we remember/think now:
I remember thinking that media encourages gossiping and how models can make us feel unsure of ourselves.

Session 5: Girlfighting
What we liked:
I liked making the smashbooks because it encouraged us to talk with our group about what we thought "girlfighting" was.
Working in the smashbook was a creative outlet
Watching the clips
I liked working with the smashbooks.
Smashbooks
I liked working in the smashbooks! It was fun working in a group!

What we remember/think now:
Mean Girls
Don't "girlfight" with your friends.

Session 6: Resolving Conflict
What we liked:
Learning about setting boundaries

What we remember/think now:
Think before you react
How to resolve a conflict, don't target the other person.

Session 7: Family
What we liked:
I liked how we got to act out the different scenarios.
I liked doing the skits
Acting the scenarios out.
I like that I got to see some scenarios people have to go through.

What we remember/think now:
I remember learning how to talk to friends and family.
Communicate better.
Don't be scared to be honest to your family.
We discussed the strategies that could be use when we are in certain situations.
Something I remember is how to talk to your family and friends more effectively.

Session 8: Cliques and Clubs
What we liked:
the game
game
I liked that you had to close your eyes and that it was a game
I liked that we got to play games and see things from a different perspective.

What we remember/think now:
Since I was the lonely cat, I experienced feeling alone and I now know how others sometimes feel.
Don't be afraid to make friends even though you are different.
I remember feeling like I fit into every animal group.
Open up your group to others, and be a friend to people in all different groups.
We talked about cliques and that we shouldn't exclude others and that we are all different.
I remember that I was one of four dogs and it made me think of how we treat people and how they would feel.

After I felt they had had enough time to answer the questions, I brought all the girls back together to talk about their reflections. Once I opened up the discussion to the girls, they really spoke quite openly. I asked them to talk about the things that they wrote. Cathy began by talking about stereotypes and said:

> I was going to say, like sometimes you go into a store, and all the girls stuff is pink. But I never like, got how it affected kids. Like if a boy likes pink or likes playing with princesses, I never really thought about how it affects kids because they feel that there's something wrong with them that they like something— around the corner.

Pearl built upon this idea and said:

> Also, yeah. I thought it was kind of like, Cathy said it was kind of like, if a boy likes pink he thinks oh, what's wrong with me. It kind of made me think when you are older you know sometimes a guy, I remember later in class, after this, we were talking about gays and stuff. And it's not really related but in a way, it really is. Because it's the basis of broader topics, like gay people and how people stereotype gay people. So it kind of builds a base for stereotypes and judgments. Because kids kind of like, take in everything they see and believe it's true. Like if kids are constantly saying, like boys are blue and girls are pink, it gives them a base for judgment and stereotypes so it, maybe doesn't affect them directly but in the future they might become very closed and judgmental toward someone.

Zola, who had not talked much at all in previous sessions, began to share. She said:

> So like when I was little, I really liked dressing up and I have two brothers and they really like trains. So we would always dress up and then play trains. And I would do that and say if one of my friends came over, they'd say, why are they dressing up, that's weird. Or like, why are they dressing up, why aren't they wearing their own clothes? Boys don't dress up.

Mia added:

> Well, when I was younger, my brothers played Barbies with me and everything and they were kind of my little servants until they were six. And they decided that wasn't what they wanted to do with their lives. And so they would play dress up with me and I have pictures of them in my clothes. And, then they decided that they wanted to play trains, and I would play trains with them.

Annie picked up where she left off:

> Okay, anyways, I had the same kind of thing since I have an older brother who's in 8th grade. When I was little, I used to love my American girl dolls, so I had a full bucket of different clothes for them, like different outfits and stuff. So I would be playing my American girl dolls and my brother would come into my room. He would want to play and we would dress them up and put them in different outfits. I don't know, I was obsessed with tiaras, so I had a hook in my room with a bunch of tiaras on that. So he would put them on. And it was one of those things where it didn't really affect him. He just wanted to do that, so he just did it.

I asked, "When do you think it started affecting him? Because I heard you say, I think that there is an idea that only girls should wear tiaras?" Annie continued:

> Until, until he was like seven, I guess, or six, I don't know. And then he hated everything in my room and he would start playing with his Nerf guns and he would barely open my room and then shoot me with them, but that's not the point. He just kind of switched, like after a certain age.

I kept prying, "Why do you think that happens?"

Annie continued, "I guess everyone saying, oh, that's for girls. Like, peer pressure. Because like whenever his friends came over, they would be like playing with the Nerf guns."

Maggie had a connection to what Annie was saying and said:

> So, what I think happened, like my brother and I for a really long time we used to play with GI Joes and Polly pockets. So he started, all these kids had older sisters, and they always had, what is the word—they were exposed to the more girly things. And I think that it was sort of when my brother went to school, like regularly, not like kindergarten, but when he actually started going every day. And I think he was exposed, to two types of classes where it was half and half and then I think it started being, the um, like even the teachers and stuff. I think the teachers, like you know not to do that. But you know that, there are certain things that were taught in books that the guy is wearing the blue shirt. And just through that, like that's when it really starts to sink in. Because before that he never had a problem with it.

Emma continued:

> So, for me, it's kind of my brother is 4 years older than me. He was always playing his own game, and he would make me play with him. So it was always like gyoko, tackle football and all this stuff that were boy things. And I really enjoyed it because when you are little you kind of look up to your siblings. And so when he liked that stuff, I think I tried to like that stuff too. And when I got older, I started to get more into like, Polly Pockets and stuff. I can't tell if it's kind of just an instinct for girls, or if it's because we see a commercial, like if it's a

> Polly Pocket commercial, you see girls playing with them. It's kind of a known fact that for girls and I can't tell if it's like an instinct that we all have, or something that's like, kind of—

She was interrupted, and the girls started to taper off of this idea. I was trying to get the girls to see how all of the themes we discussed were connected, so I asked the question, and Gloria responded:

> I kind of thought like the overall theme of the whole lesson is let's be friends, like let's include people. I think the first part was kind of showing how people are stereotyped and different things. And it's okay because people are different, and that's what we talked about and so we also talked about how we can stop excluding others and how to resolve conflict in school or with your parents. So I think this had to do with everything else because just because someone's different, you can still include the person and be their friend. So, I think it was a whole lesson plan of being friends with everybody.

Lesson 10 – From Adversaries to Allies

The objective of this class was to provide meaningful closure to the group and the program. Up to this point, we had discussed a variety of topics that were personal to the girls. We also engaged in a variety of activities that brought the group closer together. The *From Adversaries to Allies* program had created a journey for the girls at this point where they would be able to see themselves as a part of the solution to addressing relational aggression, as long as they were able to build and maintain alliances within the group and take those relationships out into the larger school community. According to the program, "The transformative and creative power of working together, using anger

constructively, and being proactive rather than reactive is key to girls' alliances and their healthy development" (*From Adversaries to Allies*).

There were two major activities planned for this group session. The first was to get the girls to participate in a reflective practice to remember the moments in the group that were important to them. I created a reflection document where the girls could write the answers to three questions: (a) What have you valued most about this class and the people in it? (b) what was the most important thing you have learned in the group? (c) What part of the group has affected you the most? The next activity from the curriculum program would be implemented in conjunction with this writing reflection to provide closure for our group meetings and their participation in the study.

The second activity for this session came directly from the program and was called "Circles of Connection" (*From Adversaries to Allies*). This activity was designed to provide an opportunity for the girls to have a feeling of closure, as the group sessions had come to an end. The questions on the reflection form that I provided the girls were very similar to the questions that accompanied this activity in the curriculum. They were designed with the goal of creating a coalition of girls in mind.

June 7, 2013

The girls came into class with a great deal of energy, probably fueled by the end of the school year rapidly approaching. This class session fell at the end of the last regular school day of the year. Only 13 girls of the 17 were in attendance this at the beginning of class, and one arrived later, after we had completed the first activity. The activity that I had planned was designed to get them focused and to provide an opportunity to reflect right away. I handed out the sheets of paper for the reflection

activity and the girls immediately got to work. They spent a few moments working on their reflections silently on the worksheets, which I provided them with. The questions on the worksheet were:

> *Question 1: What have you valued most about this class and the people in it?*
>
> *Question 2: What is the most important thing you have learned from the group?*
>
> *Question 3: What part of the group affected you the most?*

All the girls completed their individual responses, then we came together for a discussion on the activity. Their reflections are indicated in Table 3 below. After the girls had a few moments to go around and share what they wrote, I asked them to reflect on their experiences in the course overall. I wanted them to be able to process their responses, so I asked them to pair-share with the person next to them for a few moments then come back to the larger group to share their conversations.

Michelle shared first and said:

> This class was a great chance to become closer to girls that I normally wouldn't have talked to or known much about. I feel like we had a chance to share things, and that there was trust . . . we were able to get advice or comments from someone that may be going through the same thing as you. I loved this class because we were able to have time to be with girls in our grade and no one was mean or excluding. It was a really calm environment, too. And we had a chance to relate to some of the things that, like, everyone else is going through also.

Annie said she felt it was helpful to learn that "Everyone is accepted and you don't need to be a typical stereotype to fit in. Following stereotypes doesn't make you who you really are." She continued:

It also helped us learn how to handle problems and arguments with friends and family. It is a good space to discuss topics like body image, media exposure, sexism, friendships and other topics that are part of our everyday girl lives.

Table 3

Participant Responses on Course Reflection in Session 10

Name of Participant	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
Bianca	Having fun while doing wok	Stand up for each other and yourself if you know that what's happening is wrong.	Knowing that you are similar to everyone, no matter how different you are.
Sam	Learning how to deal with girlfriend problems	Friendship boundaries	Ms. Quirarte
Cathy	I most valued that my opinions mattered. I liked that I could be so comfortable here. I looked forward to coming to class.	I learned it is really important to set friendship boundaries	Ms. Quirarte
Michelle	I value the fact that everyone in our class is very open to sharing things and none of us feel uncomfortable with each other.	I have learned that pretty much everyone in this class	I think that by being in this class, our group has gotten to know each other better and become friends.
Emma	The activities made topics fun.	Effective Communication and Stereotypes	Ms. Quirarte
Annie	I valued how everyone was welcoming and supported any comments people made.	I have leaned how important it is to be nice to your friends and how important our body language is.	Everyone became better friends.
Kristen	It was just perfect	That sexual harassment isn't okay. How to tell if someone is harassing me.	Ms. Quirarte
Lindsay	How fun it was and easy to talk to everybody	That I have someone to talk to.	Knowing I'm not the only one who ever feels left out or any teenage feeling
Mia	Helping us get out of awkward things. Expressing yourself. It is fun. I felt comfortable around these people. I love the people in this class.	We all have each others backs and we are a family now. I love you!	The teacher.
Pearl		I have learned that every one has felt like they have been by themselves, even the people you would least expect.	The thing that has affected me the most about this class is that I feel open to say whatever I want to.

Table 3, continued

Kara	I have valued how my friends and people I don't know as well were open to telling be and the rest of us how they felt about certain subjects.	I have learned that girls in my grade have gone through or are going through the same things I am.	I feel now that I can go into Ms. Q for any advice.
Brandi	Having an energetic teacher and saying any words you want without getting in trouble	Girls and how we fight.	Being with my friends and knowing my place
Zola	I enjoyed all the people in this class. I really loved that you could have fun and work.	The most important thing I learned about was sexual harassment.	The thing that has affected me the most was…

Pearl said:

> I think everyone of us the seventh grade girls should take this course because I have never been in a class like this before. You can honestly say what things are going on in your life. This class teaches you a lot about standing up for others – and not with the constant lectures of bullying – and how to basically survive and avoid middle school life of cliques and mean girls scenarios. It provided concepts about life choices teen girls face, but it was really fun from the games and activities we did.

Emma said:

> This class was a really good part of my seventh grade year. My favorite thing about the class is that you don't just sit in a room at talk. We actually did hands on things. For me, one of the major ways to get be interested is by doing interactive activities. Things like the smash book were really fun, to get all of us involved and interested. This brought a lot of issues to light, especially for this stage in our lives. Girls have a hard time getting along sometimes, and the things we brought up were really helpful. For our class especially, some girls were

> having issues with friends. I can't say for sure how those conflicts were resolved, but I don't doubt this class has made a difference.

To sum up her ideas about the class and what it meant to her, she said, "It not only improved your relationships with your peers, but your relationship with yourself."

When Kara had the opportunity to share, she took a little while respond, but she stated:

> I think this class helped me bond with other girls. I thought that a lot of the girls in the class wouldn't have the same problems because we were so different from each other. I learned that girls go through the same exact things, and sometimes we need a friend to get through the hard times. I used the group to talk about issues in the world, but also kind of as a support group.

She continued, "I have really grown to love girls I never thought I could be friends with."

At this point, Lindsay became very emotional when she shared what the class meant to her. She talked for a long time about the fact that the group was a "safe space," and said:

> I can honestly say that my life would not be the same if it wasn't for this class. When I came into the class, I was in a really, really bad place. I was depressed, I was fighting with my friends, I hated my mom, and I wasn't doing well in school. I was just pretty miserable. I can honestly say, without a doubt, this class has changed my life. We don't get safe spaces like this where we can just talk, and not worry about any of the other outside stuff. We got to talk about things that were really important to us, and except for one time where something we said in the group got out – but that was addressed and it never happened again—I just felt

> like I could really trust every single person here, and I don't think I would be friends with some of these people if it wasn't for this class. I really, really wish all the girls in our class had to take this. I just think it helped me so much.

The idea of a safe space was something that we talked about, and for the rest of our discussion, it continued to come up in the girls responses. For instance, Kristen said:

> It was really good to figure out how to deal with certain situations and a safe space to talk about issues I wouldn't otherwise talk openly about. It was really beneficial for me to hear about what was happening in others' lives, because I know I'm not the only one experiencing different kinds of situations.

The recording device that I used this day in our session stopped functioning properly in the middle of this conversation, which I did not realize until long after the class session. However, the rest of the session, we continued to talk about the meaning the class had for the girls. Lindsay kept coming back to the idea of wishing they could have this group as eighth graders, next year. Before our meeting adjourned, I promised to speak to the Oceanside Middle School principal to see if he would allow us to continue to operate as some sort of club in the 2013–2014 school year, with a different, related mission statement. They were very pleased about this prospect and the idea of this being our last meeting became less of a topic of conversation. For the last five minutes of class, the girls transitioned to talking about their summers and what they would be doing in the upcoming months. I allowed them the time to be together as a group, their last official day of seventh grade, and took a moment to reflect be grateful for the time I was able to spend with them, and the transformation I had experienced as a member of the group.

Coding the Data

This program was designed to engage girls in discussions about the systemic causes of relational aggression as a byproduct of social norms and ideas. As I carefully transcribed, coded, and looked for meaning in the data I collected, some major themes emerged, which were congruent with much of the literature about relational aggression. The themes of power, safety, and silence became significant in characterizing the way girls spoke and expressed awareness of relational aggression and its systemic causes, as well as the strategies they used to address it in their lives. Chapter 5 will analyze and discuss how the girls responded to these issues in their lives as well as their relationships with one another, in order to determine if their experiences within the program connect to the literature about relational aggression.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The results from this study on relational aggression with middle school girls indicate that the experience of participating in a program aligned with feminist pedagogical praxis was a positive experience for the participants. Seventeen middle school girls at Oceanside school participated in the study. Over the course of their participation in the 10-session program, the young women dialogued openly about their perspectives on relational aggression, social causes for relational aggression, and developed more effective approaches for dealing with relational aggression. The following discussion will explore some of the themes that emerged, how those themes connect to the literature about feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and relational aggression, and how the data respond to the central research question of the study.

In coding and analyzing the data, three major themes emerged which show how the action implemented in this participatory action research study impacted the critical consciousness of the 17 middle school girls who participated. The first theme that emerged was that of masculinity and femininity. As theorized through a critical feminist lens, relational aggression is an effect of the social values American girls are taught from an early age (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Qin, 2004). The data illustrating this theme showed how girls articulated their knowledge of gender stereotypes, factors that enforce those ideas, pervasive cultural values of heterosexism, and the way media reinforce binary ideas of masculinity and femininity. The second theme to emerge from the data was safety.

Throughout the course of their participation in the program, girls expressed some challenges with feeling safe (physically or emotionally) in their experiences in and coming and going from school. This section discusses the data related to safety in a way that also sets the stage for some conclusions and recommendations made in Chapter 6. The final theme that emerged from the data was the theme of invalidation. This section presents the data where participants shared their feelings that their experiences with relational aggression were seen as invalid or unimportant by a parent or other adult. These three themes come together to paint a clearer picture about girls' critical consciousness about relational aggression, in order to determine if their participation in the program further cultivated their emerging conscientization.

Masculinity and Femininity

Consciousness of the ways masculinity and femininity inform and perpetuate girls' propensity to act in relationally aggressive ways was a stated objective of both the current study and the curriculum program selected (Brown & Madden, 2009). The fact that this theme emerged from the data validated a supposition that this would be an important topic as girls engaged in the curriculum program. The extent to which girls were be able to identify and talk about these issues deeply was measured purely qualitatively, as this was the only methodology for data collection in this study. The data showed that when dialogical and critical pedagogical strategies were implemented to give the young women who participated in this study full control over their conversations, participants showed they had the ability to discuss and identify pervasive notions of gender in society. They demonstrated this ability in a way that showed the girls had an

existing foundation for understanding this idea, grounded in their own experiences and observations.

Stereotypes

From a feminist perspective, the perpetuation of binary and restrictive views of masculinity and femininity are an inevitable consequence of participation in mainstream American society (Butler, 1990, 1993; Charon, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994; Walter, 2005). Most girls in the study showed they had some level of understanding of what the pervasive stereotypes for women were, which was indicated in their responses to the activity during session 3. However, participants did not demonstrate the ability to articulate the ways these stereotypes impact women, beyond how they personally felt about the stereotypes. It was not until they were able to engage in discussion with the other girls in the group that girls really began developing their ideas based on the sentiments shared by other participants to express deeper awareness about the effects these stereotypes had on women and girls. Thus, the data show that as they engaged in dialogue with one another about the issues, the girls in this study were able to develop a deeper understanding of the implications gender stereotypes have for women.

Enforcing Gender Norms

There are a variety of factors whereby gender is socially learned in society (Butler, 1990; Mann, 1994; Mead, 1934). During session 3, the girls began speaking about how media impacts gender stereotypes in contemporary culture. Participants were able to identify the ways in which media enforces and perpetuates gender norms. Additionally, the dialogue that resulted from the conversation showed that they were able to identify other sources of gendered messages. In this conversation, participants

articulated their feelings that fathers held more rigid views on what was stereotypically feminine and masculine, and that they were more likely to voice these notions than girls' mothers. One conversation was about male versus female colors, a theme that came up in four separate sessions. During session 3, Bianca mentioned her dad refused to have a white car because that was a "girly" color. Additionally, Maggie mentioned that her father thought white iPhones were for girls. Mia spoke about a time where a male friend's father refused to allow him to get pink rubber bands on his braces, because pink was for girls. Girls' assertions that fathers held more strict expectations for gender norms were in line with Mann's (1994) assertions about the differences in ways mothers and fathers perpetuate gender roles.

This theme arose in a later session, where the girls were talking about the different toys girls and boys were allowed to play with. According to research, fathers are more likely to encourage girls to behave like stereotypical "girls" and boys to engage in behaviors that are stereotyped "boy"; but they are more likely to correct a male child if he is playing "like a girl," than if a girl is engaging in slightly masculine play behavior (Mann, 1994). Mia and Pearl both connected to this idea when they talked about a children's book set to music, called "Daniel's Doll." The story is about a boy who wants a doll, but his father refuses to buy him one and he becomes sad. His father would rather him to play with "boy" things. The girls bridged this idea to heterosexism, and how it is easier to act male, regardless of one's gender, than it is to act female (for both male and female children). Once again, the girls dialogued openly, building upon one another's experiences and comments to cocreate meaning and strengthen understanding of both their own experiences and the experiences of others.

Hidden Curricula

Values of heterosexism and traditional binary notions of gender are inherent in girls' upbringing (Butler, 1990; de Beauvoir, 1949; Mann, 1994) and are reinforced frequently once girls begin to go to school through intentional and unintentional practices (Mann, 1994; Sadker et al., 2009). The girls were able to connect to this idea during session 9, when they discussed the relationship between pervasive messages about gender and relational aggression. On the topic of dominant gender messages, many of the girls shared that they had either older or younger brothers. In line with the research about raising boys (Brown, 2003; Crowley Jack, 2001; Tanembaum, 2002), in addition to research about the hidden curriculum (Mann, 1994; McLaren, 2002; Sadker et al., 2009), girls in the study expressed that their brothers' ideas about socially acceptable behaviors for boys became solidified when those boys went to school regularly. One participant was even clear in distinguishing "not kindergarten, but "real" school. The girls remembered sharing interests with their brothers in a way that showed feelings of both nostalgia and loss.

Heterosexism

Values of heterosexism are omnipresent in contemporary American society, through both subtle mainstream invalidation of non-heterosexual people and hateful antigay propaganda. This rhetoric was perhaps never as pronounced as it was in 2013 (the year this study was conducted) when the Supreme Court was set to rule on the Defense of Marriage Act. In discussing the topics of masculinity and femininity, the girls identified their perceptions of experiences of homosexual boys and men as a result of gendered discrimination within society. Because on the spectrum of understanding

gender bias and sexism, understanding the experiences of effeminate men as a manifestation of sexism seemed to be a deeper connection that I did not expect they would make. However, the girls spoke to how it was easier to be a girl who acted like a boy than a boy who acted like a girl, connecting values of heterosexism with a cultural preference for masculinity over femininity.

I was surprised that the girls seemed to have an abstract grasp of the dimensions of masculinity and femininity in society and how each gender is relegated disparate amounts of power in society. Lindsay spoke to this idea and said:

> If they always hang out with girls, like if they're their only friends. They name them as like, not gay, but they're different. And people are like, scared of different. My godfather is gay, and I think that gay people are so nice. They're always like, the nicest people. And I don't even think it's because they are gay. And mostly, I think, like in the gist of things . . . it's like, put yourself in, like their shoes. I know if I was like gay, or if I saw the other side of what boys like, I would want people to accept me. And so, like, I feel really bad you know?

Girls were able to link power associated with masculinity to oppression of non-heterosexual individuals in ways that often overlapped their own experiences within a patriarchal society.

Media Messages

According to *Media Smarts*, women are both underrepresented and misrepresented in contemporary media, and these images perpetuate negative stereotypes about women and girls (www.mediasmarts.ca). Session 3 was dedicated to talking to girls about the messages in contemporary media, and the impact those messages have on

girls self-concept. First, the girls reflected on their own ideas about gender in media (p. 120), then the girls were each given a teen magazine and asked to identify some things that bothered them to share with the group. One girl expressed how she has struggled with her weight, and the magazine reinforced the idea of a perfect weight. Another girl spoke to how a girl was described as "curvy" and having an "hourglass figure" when she was in fact, quite thin.

In this same session, an interesting exchange occurred between Kara and Mia. Kara exclaimed, "It's like, when you read a magazine, you feel really bad about yourself."

Mia countered, "Then why do you read them?"

Kara responded, "Because they're fun!" This really summarizes the reason girls are so vulnerable to media messages. They are drawn in because it is fun to be "in the know" and understand what is happening, and what is trending. But, at the same time, it has negative implications for girls' self-concept. This is in line with the literature that talks about the pervasiveness of gendered messages and how girls knowingly and unknowingly consume them in such a way that the messages begin to seem normal, even if the girls may be able to identify them as being somewhat harmful (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Qin, 2004).

Through their discussions about contemporary society, in lessons designed to help girls identify the systemic causes for relational aggression, the ability to engage with other girls in the group provided depth to the discussions and intensified the girls' understanding of the issues. Frequently when an issue or topic was presented, one or two

girls would react to the prompt in a superficial manner. However, as the girls were able to dialogue, share, and build off of the experiences of other young women in the group, their ability to identify the causes and articulate the impact began to grow.

Safety

As the study came to a close in our final session, the girls spoke about the class as a "safe space" for them to talk about issues that were important to them; where they could use language and say things while feeling free from judgment. The theme of safety emerged from the data in two ways: both in the literal sense, surrounding their experiences both on the bus and on campus with sexual harassment and, more abstractly, as the feeling they had about the group meetings in this study. The idea that safety was something lacking for one reason or another has been discussed further in the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 6. This section will share some of the data, and the more minor themes that emerged within the larger theme of safety throughout girls' participation in the study.

The School Bus

While bullying on social media has received a great deal of attention in a world where many adults and teens use social media, bullying in school busses is a phenomena that has been perceived as serious for many years. To me, this scenario is a timeless image from movies and media. It invokes an image of Tom Hanks's character in the film *Forrest Gump* (1994), looking for a seat on the bus and not being allowed to sit next to anyone. The documentary film *Bully* (2012) by Lee Hirsh also captures scenes of bullying on the school bus. Over the course of our sessions, the girls come back to the idea that the school bus is not a safe space. In our first session, one girl stated, quite out

of the blue when we are discussing what the rules for our classes would be, "I just think it would be really funny for a teacher to ride the bus and hear what they say."

The reality that buses at Oceanside School felt unsafe to these young women came to light during session 5 when the girls collectively reported a widespread instance of sexual harassment that was happening at school. According to the girls, this was occurring more frequently on the busses to and from school. During this session, the girls were all shouting about ways they had felt disrespected or violated in one way or another. Bianca clarified by saying, "This mostly happens on the bus F.Y.I." According to the girls, there was a disconnect between the perceived safety rules provided at school and the perceived lack of such rules on the school bus. Students were apparently acutely aware of fact that a bus driver was not school personnel, and his or her job rendered him or her both logistically and symbolically unable to enforce any disciplinary action for problematic behaviors on the bus. In March 2014, Paul Vodden, the parent of a UK teen who committed suicide, spoke about the paradoxical nature of school busses that create an atmosphere perfect for bullying. Spurred to activism by the tragic loss of his son, he argued:

> Where else would you have 50 children in a confined space and with no supervision? Bullying is rife on school buses and, even if drivers see something is going on, there is not much they can do about it**.** In most cases they have received no training in how to deal with children and don't know the difference between normal activities and bullying. In Ben's case the driver thought he was just joining in with a bit of childish banter and had no idea of the effect it was having. In many ways he was a victim too. (*The Daily Echo*)

The fact that students perceived a lack of rules and experienced a lack of safety on the bus is something this school and others need to take very seriously. Schools have a responsibility to look at all the spaces where acts of bullying or aggression of any kind are taking place. There is a clear pedagogical interest in ensuring the safety of students during school, before and after school, and on their ways to and from school. Children who feel targeted and victimized are never able to reach their full academic potential.

Sexual Harassment

Session 5 included a discussion about setting clear physical boundaries and how to assert one's needs in difficult situations with friends. This conversation took an unexpected turn, and the girls began reporting issues of sexual harassment, which most of the girls in the group had experienced. Although sexual harassment does fall outside of the scope of relational aggression because the perpetrator of the aggressive act is no longer the girls themselves, this issue is still deeply connected, stemming from the reality that girls have less power than boys. Thus, it is not surprising that the conversation transpired naturally within the course of a typical session. The taxonomy of a sexual assault is deeply connected to an imbalance of power, both interpersonally and in society as a whole. The details of this session were recorded in depth in Chapter 4; two ideas emerged from the data, which are discussed in more detail below. The first was the retaliation girls experienced for reporting the sexual harassment, and the second related theme was the guilt or regret they felt.

An interesting dynamic at play when most of the girls were reporting the instance of sexual harassment in session 5 was that some of the girls in the group were either clearly uncomfortable or upset, disagreeing with the girls who were reporting the

sexually harassing actions. The fact that some of the girls were blaming other girls for being victims of sexual harassment was of concern to me. Additionally, the fact that some of the girls were defending the boy's sexually aggressive acts was troubling. However, in connecting back to the literature about the ways oppressed groups in society may be oblivious to and complicit in to their own oppression, it states that girls learn what it means to be a girl very early on (Mann, 1994). The ways that gender is reinforced in society make it so that girls are not always fully aware of the messages they receive (Brown, 2003; Butler, 1990, 1993; de Beauvoir 1949; Douglas, 2010; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2007; Qin, 2004). They internalize the messages, often not questioning their validity or their impact on girls' experiences in the world.

In the session after the issue was reported, I reconnected with the girls on this issue to make sure there was some closure within the group. Sam and Maggie spoke to the fact that they had gone back and talked to the boy whom they reported, almost apologetically, and how they felt guilty for reporting him. Additionally, they talked about making sure he was "okay" and "fine" after the events unfolded. This raised some interesting questions and concerns about why the girls felt it was important to do this. However, their actions are consistent with feminist assertions that women are taught that they should be passive and demure. In standing up for themselves, the girls directly confronted those gender norms. To that end, this offers a possible explanation to why girls may have felt guilt or responsibility for asserting boundaries about their physical safety and wellbeing. The fact that the issue of power, interpersonal relationships, and sexual harassment are so interconnected means that a facilitator should anticipate the possibility of girls reporting instances like these within the context of a typical session. It

would be advisable for the facilitator to be aware of the school's or institution's policies surrounding harassment and student safety before implementing a program like this at a school site.

Safe Spaces

Between session 5, where girls reported the issue of sexual harassment, and the following week, some of the girls grew upset because people outside of the study became aware of the conversations we were having within the group. In the beginning of session 6, I checked in with the girls to see how they were feeling about the events that ensued. Mia came forward to explain that she was the reason the discussion had gotten out of the group, and subsequently out of control. This issue of confidentially in the group was important for us to address, because in order for the girls to feel safe sharing things and engaging with one another on sensitive issues, there needed to be an expectation of privacy for members of the group. I was very worried that the issue was going to be more serious than it was, and I was relieved in the end that Mia came forward to clarify that she was the reason people knew about it. This was an incredibly brave thing for her to do, because she had no idea if the group was going to react negatively or not. The way Lindsay and Kristen reacted—gracefully, allowing Mia to maintain her dignity, was not something I had expected them to be capable of at that moment. I was very impressed by the maturity their reactions carried.

The actual language of the group as a "safe space" transpired in session 9, when Kristen said:

> It was really good to figure out how to deal with certain situations and a "safe" space to talk about issues I wouldn't otherwise talk openly about. It was really

beneficial for me to hear about what was happening in others' lives, because I know I'm not the only one experiencing different kinds of situations.

In the final session, Lindsay shared, "I can honestly say, without a doubt, this class has changed my life. We don't get safe spaces like this where we can just talk, and not worry about any of the other outside stuff." The fact that girls came to identify the space as a "safe space" distinct from other programming and educative opportunities at Oceanside School is an important outcome of the study, because it has heavily informed the recommendations and conclusions that resulted from this study.

Critical Consciousness of Relational Aggression

As the research question in this study stated, the goal of this study was to determine whether participation in a program designed to decrease relational aggression among adolescent girls increased participants' critical consciousness about relational aggression. In that regard, girls showed they had the ability to identify types of relational aggression that they were most familiar with, which included: gossip, labeling, back-stabbing, name-calling, and spreading rumors. The things that they were familiar with, but had a harder time identifying, were passive-aggressive behavior, manipulation, use of relationship as leverage, and betraying trust. The data showed other themes connected to critical consciousness: superficial ideas about relational aggression, the use of relationships as leverage, cliques and clubs, as well as perceptions of male versus female friendships which showed that their critical consciousness about relational aggression contributed to these young women's perceptions of female relationships in their lives and in the lives of the women around them.

Superficial Ideas about Relational Aggression

In session 4, I showed the girls two different clips from the film *Mean Girls* (2004). When asked to identify the kinds of girlfighting behaviors they saw in the first clip, the girls came up with: gossip, spreading rumors, talking behind someone's back, calling names like "whore" and "slut," and being "two-faced." This clip made those more explicit, but these were also the most stereotypical behaviors associated with girls fighting so the girls did not have a hard time identifying them. The second clip was more challenging for them. I helped fill in the ideas that I hoped they would see. Gradually they come up with the relationally aggressive traits that Janice was exhibiting in the clip: sarcasm, passive aggressive behavior, turning everyone against her, manipulation, and questioning someone's sexuality in a way that is intentionally mean and mocking. These ideas were more challenging for them to identify and speak about. I do not believe this meant they were less aware of them, but they appeared to not have the language at the ready to discuss what they saw.

I asked the girls to tell me what they thought about the term "catfight," but again, the ideas did not come readily for them. The girls were being respectful and were engaged, but again, I ended up filling in some of the ideas I hoped they would be able to identify. Lindsay did not agree with that idea, "I feel like that doesn't really happen," she argued. "We don't fight over popularity and stuff. I don't know. I mean maybe it like, goes on and I just don't know it." This idea directly countered the research on relation aggression, which says that girls struggle for power over one another, which sets the stage perfectly for relationally aggressive acts to take place. This means that there were one of three possibilities at work that influenced Lindsay's thinking about stereotypical

girlfighting behaviors: (a) Fighting for power over one another was not something that happened at this school site, and within this group of girls; (b) Lindsay was not able to observe and connect to the ways struggle for power informs the way girls are mean to one another, or (c) Her understanding for the reasons girls fight with one another within her social context was surface level.

In this session, the girls did not seem to have a language to talk about the ways that girls acted in relationally aggressive ways toward one another, but I was not under the impression that they were not aware of it. It was quite the contrary. This lesson validated that the work that I was doing with the girls was important. Girls were also not clear about whether or not they deeply understood the systemic causes for relational aggression in society (grounded in social learning theory). As a consequence, they had a hard time talking about relational aggression and talking about it when they saw it. It is still my hope that participation in this program will help them develop more awareness of this issue.

Girls Use Friendships as Leverage to Control One Another

The fact that Lindsay countered the idea that girlfighting was riddled with a dimension of power was interesting because of her position within the "popular" friend group. Lindsay had been a friend to all four girls who make up the two sets of "best friends" that participated in the study. She had known all the girls since kindergarten, but due to a falling out with Maggie and Sam, who were angry at her not keeping a secret when Maggie had confided in her, they were no longer friends. Lindsay was not identified as a "best" friend to any of the girls, although she was still a member of their friend group. Lindsay's friendship with the two sets of best friends who publicly

identified as best friends was an act of exclusion, although she did not perceive it this way. According to Simmons (2011), these girls fit the mold of potentially acting as "frenemies" to Lindsay, an idea further supported Dellasega and Nixon (2003), whereby girls who are friends are frequently perpetrators of relational aggression, which can have serious effects on girls' self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Cliques and Clubs

In conjunction with these ideas of belonging and self-esteem, Lesson 7 was dedicated to investigating girls' experiences, feelings about, and perceptions of cliques in middle school. The girls were great listeners and were engaged in listening to her from the moment she began speaking. After she had finished, I asked if any other girls wanted to speak to the experience and tell about how it was relevant to their real lives, both inside and outside of school. In this conversation, the girls reacted powerfully to the responsibilities of being a *cat* versus being a *cow.* It was interesting to hear that most of the girls in the group had experiences with both being an insider and an outsider. This was amplified by the way the girls were willing to listen compassionately to the one *cat* in the group when she talked about what the activity was like for her. Most of the girls could connect to the idea of being an outsider at one moment or another at school. Perhaps the most powerful thing that transpired from this session was that every girl in the group, whether she was perceived to be popular or not, identified that she felt like a *cat* or an outsider at one point or another at school. Some of the things that the girls recalled about this session when they were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences later were:

> "Since I was the lonely cat, I experienced feeling alone and I now know how others sometimes feel."
>
> "I remember feeling like I fit into every animal group."
>
> "I remember that I was one of four dogs and it made me think of how we treat people and how they would feel."

Boys Make Better Friends

There were some moments where participants expressed frustration with their female relationships and the difficulties that they had with their friends. An example of this was in session 2, when Kristen said:

> I feel like girls are overly dramatic and everything has to be a big deal. And then, and then, with guys, they don't like, try to be mean—I've like witnessed this—it's like on a firsthand account. Like, the guys in our class, they like insult each other, and then they're like, "Oh, sorry, that was mean, I didn't really mean that."

Another way participants expressed how they have learned either through experiences or social messages that they ought to distrust one another was in telling about their mother's experiences with women and girls in their own lives. In connecting to Kristen's idea about boys having less dramatic friendships than girls, Emma commented, ""My mom says she had a lot of friends that were guys because she couldn't handle the girl drama." Immediately, multiple girls connected to this idea. It was interesting and eye-opening to see how many girls expressed that their female role models had also expressed frustration with female relationships to their daughters. Girls expressed that relational aggression was intergenerational and stayed with women in their transition from adolescence to adulthood. Some even shared that she had been targeted by relationally aggressive acts

from another girl's mother. According to the literature, girls learn to distrust other women based on negative experiences with friends backstabbing, spreading rumors, and acting in ways that are quintessentially relationally aggressive (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Simmons, 2011). However, the ways girls shared these experiences show that they may also learn about relational aggression second-hand, from their mothers and other adult women in their lives.

That the girls' ability to recognize deeper forms of relational aggression seemed to be more superficial initially, and their awareness and ability to discuss and identify these issues evolved as a consequence of their participation in the program, shows that the program did have an impact on their ability to think critically about the ways girls exhibit relational aggression to one another. For some, this program addressed gaps in their understanding about what constitutes relational aggression. A few of these girls were able to talk about relational aggression and their relationships with other girls differently after participating in this program. Other girls were at least exposed to these ideas, and the hope is that they will begin to develop more concrete and critical awareness of these issues with more time and experience.

Invalidation

The final theme that emerged through analyzing the qualitative data that emerged as a result of this study was the theme of feeling young women's experiences with relational aggression were not taken seriously by those in a position of power and authority who could have helped or supported them. It is interesting that this theme follows the discussion above that asserts girls may learn about relational aggression from their mothers and other adult women in their lives, because this section is about how

those same women minimize girls' experiences with relational aggression in ways that invalidate them. As the literature states, relational aggression is a common phenomenon widely experienced, observed, or enacted by middle school girls (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crowley Jack, 2001; Dellasega, 2005; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Mann, 1994; Simmons, 2011; Susman & Pajer, 2003; Tanembaum, 2002; Underwood, 2003). The fact that girls feel adult women in their lives invalidate their experiences is problematic for two reasons: (a) the literature postulates that relational aggression is real and has negative effects, (b) through our sessions, girls expressed that their mothers also had issues with "girl drama" or other negative relationships with women, suggesting they had experienced it themselves.

Girls Are Labeled "Mean" Girls by Media and Adults

Before the study began, I had heard from teachers in the community that this group of girls (the entire class, not just the "popular" group) had a problem with meanness. It also appeared that the girls had internalized the mean label in a way that made them feel particularly anxious at the outset of the study. Bianca said, "I've been accused of being powerful and popular by a teacher. It was upsetting. She said, 'I know you have power because you're, like popular, but you can't be mean to people.'"

In session 4, Shoshanna, Lindsay, Michelle, and Annie all spoke to some experiences they had being invalidated by adults in their lives when they had been targeted by relationally aggressive acts. The girls that shared stories of how they were the recipients of relationally aggressive acts spoke of experiencing conflict and feelings of invalidation when they brought this to their parents' attention. Frequently, girls would tell their parents about a relationally aggressive action that happened, and their parents

would brush it off as a rite of passage, or attribute fault to the girls themselves. This invalidation was something the girls found incredibly frustrating. It was my hope that session 6 would be meaningful in addressing this issue, when we talked about how to identify relational aggression and how to communicate with family and friends about issues that were important to them. While girls did develop strategies about some ways to cope with relationally aggressive acts between friends, as well as conflict with close members of their families, it remained a concern that the girls identified parents, teachers, and other sources who would typically be identified as potential sources of support as people who invalidated their experiences with relational aggression.

Summary

This chapter discussed the major themes that emerged from the data collected in this study, which sought to answer the question: *In what ways does a curriculum designed to decrease relational aggression among middle school girls impact critical consciousness of relational aggression among the participants?* The qualitative data discussed here showed that the opportunity to dialogue openly about issues related to relational aggression in adolescent girls provided them an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of their experiences and the experiences of the other young women in this study. *Critical consciousness* in this study was defined as the ways girls identified, spoke about, and expressed critical awareness of relational aggression in society, developing practices to address it in their lives in ways that are empowering and humanizing. Because the data collected showed changes in the girls' ability to identify, talk about, and express greater depth in their awareness of relational aggression, both the

curriculum program and the development of *critical consciousness* were positively connected in this study.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This research study sought to measure the impact of a program on the critical consciousness of middle school girls who participated in the program. In particular, the objective was to investigate *how participation in a program designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls increased critical consciousness about relational aggression among participants.* In this study, an existing curriculum program was implemented in order to assess how dialogical teaching methods grounded in both critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy impacted the ability of participants to recognize relational aggression, the causes, and some solutions for addressing it in their lives. The program was a 10-week program that took place at a private, coed, nonreligious school with 17 seventh-grade girls. Through this research, many themes were identified as important in explaining girls' experiences in the program implemented in this study, which were largely consistent with the literature. This chapter discusses the conclusions gleaned from this study, in addition to recommendations for future research and programming for the school site in this study. Beyond the school site, this chapter will elaborate on what the data collected in this study tell about the importance of programming to address issues like relational aggression for middle school girls in general.

Several major conclusions that emerged from the findings of this study will be discussed here. The study showed that girls were able to work toward a deeper understanding of relational aggression, gender in American society, and their experiences

as young women, when they had the opportunity to engage in dialogical strategies within a program whose goal was the cultivation of critical consciousness. The creation of safe spaces for middle school students, particularly girls, is an important undertaking that can have a positive impact on their middle school experience. Another finding of this study is that middle school girls still have a superficial understanding of relational aggression and other gender issues; and even when they do sense there is an issue, they may have limited language to speak of their concerns. In order to support deeper understanding of these issues and how they affect the girls themselves, as well as the development of voice, programs where dialogical strategies are implemented within a critical pedagogical classroom can help. The current study also showed that while their understanding of relational aggression may have been superficial, girls did have some level of victim consciousness and were able to identify the sources of their oppression. An interesting and unexpected finding in this study was that girls in this (academic, socioeconomic, and educational) context linked issues of gendered violence and oppression with issues of heterosexism and homophobia, which has larger curricular, human development, and pedagogical implications.

The Importance of Programming

In the words of the young women who participated in this study, "safe spaces" for girls in a world where safety is not necessarily a part of their daily experience is of paramount importance. Furthermore, creating those spaces with the goal of allowing girls to dialogue openly about the things that deeply concern them, creating a sense of security and belonging is important from a psychological and emotional, but also a feminist standpoint. Because relational aggression is pervasive, because it is serious, and

because the effects can be long-lasting, it is important to develop programming to help girls understand this issue, its systemic causes, and the impact of these things on their lives. So often, girls are silenced by society, both inside (Sadker et al., 2009) and outside of schools. It is not only a necessity, by also a moral responsibility that schools make every effort to neutralize and even undo the hegemonic devices present in education and in the world.

Throughout the course of this work both before and after this study took place, I was confronted with questions about equal programming opportunities for boys. It would be worthwhile to look at boys as potentially powerful male allies, and implement programming to teach them to use their agency to take meaningful action in their own lives to promote counter-hegemonic narratives about women and other oppressed individuals. Additionally, it would also be important and worthwhile to reach out to the boys who do not identify with heteronormative cultural values, and who embody another sexuality or gender. In the study, the young women who participated identified these boys as sharing a similar state of disproportionate power in this school community and felt strongly about the importance of supporting these boys.

Recommendations for Program Design

The importance of programming is central to girls' ability to develop awareness of issues in their lives that are important to them, not merely relational aggression. Schools infrequently adopt educative models whereby girls can be engaged in dialogue with one another about issues that are important to them—such as those recommended by critical pedagogical praxis and feminist pedagogy. These models of emancipatory praxis, where girls can come to a fuller realization of their places in the world, can begin to

support young women in acting against the structures that relegate them to less power and social agency over their own lives. Because this program not only advocated for the creation of that space, but also included teaching practices and activities grounded in those methodologies, I recommend this program continue at Oceanside School and that programs like this one be implemented, according to the needs of different communities, in order to support the empowerment of young women everywhere. As shown in the data collected, most of the young women in this study believed this program should be required for young women in seventh grade because of the growth they experienced as a consequence of their participation in this study.

Dialogical Praxis

Discussions and interventions with middle school students about relational aggression, bullying, or cyberbullying are often one-dimensional. They involve an outside speaker with a Power Point presentation and provide no opportunity for relationships to grow between girls and their facilitator; nor does this model include space for young women to dialogue and come to a deeper understanding of their own experiences, or experiences with others. Perhaps the most problematic issue with this sort of programming is the fact that it does not engage young women as a part of the solution or provide a space for them to develop healthier, less adversarial relationships with one another. They are not provided a space to think critically, ask questions, and develop skills to combat the pervasiveness of relational aggression. These are the primary tenets embedded within the curriculum program implemented in this study, which resulted in the young women having a positive overall experience within the program.

This study heavily relied on dialogical praxis as a strategy and way of working with the young women that sought to provide the space for participants to cultivate critical consciousness of relational aggression. This drew heavily upon the assertions of Paulo Freire (1970), who argued that in an effort to undo some of the traditional domesticating strategies typically present in the classroom, dialogical praxis creates the communicative space that allows participants to collectively construct knowledge, building off of one another's ideas and experiences in order to come to a place where they can fully perceive the oppressive situation in which they live. In this study, dialogical praxis was embedded in the curriculum program as well as in the facilitator's guide.

The *Facilitator's Guide to Being A Muse* (2009) articulated clearly that the objective of the program was not to give information about relational aggression to girls. Rather, the goal was to create a space for girls to have meaningful conversations about relational aggression and its causes, thereby building alliances and engaging girls' capabilities for leadership to act together to create solutions to the issue. The guide pointed out that giving the control necessary to do this can feel uncomfortable, and it can even be messy. At times in the program, giving the girls control over the conversation meant I felt uncertain about where the conversation might lead. Frequently, it went in a completely different direction than I had hoped. However, as proponents of critical pedagogy say will happen, when students are given the opportunity to control the conversations, they come to a deeper understanding of the issues that are most important to them. I think this was certainly true for the young women in the study. A wonderful example of one of these moments was in session 2 where the girls had begun to drift

away from the theme for the day. Just as I was about to intervene and assert my authority to get the girls "back on track," Pearl made a comment that brought the conversation full circle back to the main idea of the session. Moments like these validated the use of critical and feminist pedagogical strategies to engage the issue of relational aggression with the participants in the study. Future implementation of this program, other initiatives to engage girls in the issue, and other opportunities to engage students in issues that are important and personal to them should consider this strategy an integral piece of the emancipatory framework underpinning of these endeavors.

The dialogical design of this program impacted the experiences of the participants in a significantly positive way; however, the creation of dialogical spaces for students can be a transformative experience for an educator or facilitator. There were many moments where the participants in the study brought me to a deeper understanding of their lived experiences that I knew less about than I originally assumed I did. The opportunity to engage in this dialogical space was, for me, an experience where my perceptions of the young women I was working with drastically changed. There are so many ways in which our traditional educational system in the United States reinforces the "teacher as expert" notion. However, the dialogical model reinforces that as humans and individuals, we are a constant intellectual and interpersonal work in progress.

Proactive Programs

Engaging students in proactive programs is paramount. As a society, reacting to a problem after it happens is a common way of addressing issues. Furthermore, in many institutions, especially schools, an issue will not be perceived as a potential threat until it after it has happened once and can no longer be ignored. As a result, schools take

reactive measures on many things including: bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, school violence, drug and alcohol use, cheating, tardiness, and many other things. Very few strategies are in place to proactively address these issues except the punishment for those actions being known by students. The outcomes and experiences of the participants in this program indicate that proactive programs may have the potential to be more meaningful than these reactive programs. In programs where students are engaged and supported in developing critical awareness about an issue, they know they are being engaged as a part of the solution, rather than punished because they are part of the problem.

The lack of programming surrounding issues that are statistically shown to affect large numbers of students send students the unintentional message that, somehow, that thing is unimportant. Sending children the message that their experiences are important does not fulfill the potential schools have to reach children on a deeper level than one that is purely academic. Changes at the institutional level must take place in order for schools to actively engage issues that are part of students' lived experiences in a way that acknowledges the reality of these issues, thereby validating the lives and experiences of the children in their care.

Reacting in a way that does not benefit students makes them feel belittled and disrespected, minimizing the impact of moments that have the potential to positively impact school culture. The girls who participated in this program reflected on their own experiences with the school's reactive strategies for dealing with bullying, cheating, theft, and other issues. They talked about how these programs are not effective, and research is beginning to emerge that will support this idea as well. In fact, they remarked that these

sorts of reactive interventions made them feel belittled and that they were ineffective at addressing the issue. The themes of “trust” and “respect” were pervasive in this discussion, and participants wanted to feel both coming from the administration and the specialists and programs they employed. This is not arguing for the complete abolition of guest speakers and programs designed to address issues on campuses. More so, it makes the case for more programming with more intention behind making the experience as beneficial for students as possible.

Helping students feel emotionally and physically safe is one of the major responsibilities of the school from a human development and an educative standpoint. Because students who do not feel safe at school cannot learn, doing nothing or reacting long after events take place are clearly not in sync with the pedagogical goals of the school or the well-being of the girls. Schools have a responsibility to treat issues discussed at great length in this study seriously, developing proactive programs that prevent students from being victimized and feeling unsafe in school, before and after school, and coming and going from school. When girls consistently receive messages from parents, teachers, and media that relational aggression is not serious, is not important, and is not an issue worth addressing, they feel invalidated and dehumanized. Thus, the findings in this study support the development of curricular programs for young women, much like the one utilized in this study.

“Safe Spaces”

Because the design of the program creates the space were girls can feel empowered to take control of the space and make conversations more meaningful to them, I learned that in this model, a facilitator must be aware that conversations can and

will take unintended turns. A wonderful example of this occurring during the study was in session 5, where I had planned activities on conflict resolution. However, the girls used that class session to report a widespread issue of sexual harassment. As a court-mandated reporter and employee of the school, I was required to report the issue. I told the girls, “If you tell me something and I feel like someone is making you unsafe, I am responsible to address that issue.” Thus, the majority of that session was spent taking the time to allow the girls to report their concerns and experiences. The school dealt with the issue swiftly in a manner, which I respected, and made the process very transparent to the girls who had reported the actions. However, I was still concerned with the fact that, according to the girls, this had been going on for over one year, and it had gone largely unreported. My concern was that if this issue, which to me was so clearly an issue of right versus wrong and personal safety, had gone so long without being reported, what other issues were also not being reported. Investigating the circumstances under which adolescents report acts of violence and how the creation of safe spaces with trusted adults can have an impact are topics deserving greater attention in a future study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Achieving and Measuring Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness was defined for the purposes of this study as girls being able to talk about, identify, and isolate systemic causes, which led to relational aggression in adolescent girls. As is common in many well-intentioned qualitative studies where participatory action research is utilized, this study quickly took on a life of its own. And although it is difficult to say whether or not the participants involved in this study developed more awareness about relational aggression quantitatively, they certainly

developed a critical language to identify and discuss the systemic causes that lead to relational aggression, as can be concluded through qualitative measures employed here.

In the final class, I asked participants the question, “So what’s relational aggression and why does it happen?” When they were not able to answer right away, I was disheartened at first. I went back to my field notes for each group meeting, which is the point where I realized that what I was hoping to measure was more difficult to code for than I had originally thought. When I designed the study, I expected relational aggression would be observable, but girls’ individual processes were deeply personal. Since I was an active participant in most of the dialogue, my experiences with the participants made it easier to quantify and explain their experiences, but I needed to reconfigure my approach to making sense of the data. It is where the data and my field notes converged that the answer to my research question became most apparent. Participatory action research was the perfect methodology for this study because I was able to provide a more rich description and code the data for themes that I did not originally expect to discover.

Another difficulty I encountered in coding the data was that conscientization is abstract, and the ability for participants to come to that realization would vary from person to person. I originally hoped to provide narratives for each participant in the findings section and show how she developed over the course of the study. However, this proved to be impossible due to the group context for this study. Instead, conscientization was uncovered as a consequence of the dialectical relationship between participants within the context of the dialogue this program facilitated. Some thoughts I recorded about critical consciousness after the final session were:

1. Relational aggression is experienced differently from girl to girl, based on the roles that each girl is accustomed to playing (target, aggressor, bystander, or ally) at any particular moment in time.

2. The systemic causes for relational aggression are deeply rooted in cultural norms that are difficult to identify and critically evaluate.

3. Girls' individual levels of understanding and ability to develop critical consciousness about the world around them is a deeply personal experience, and although their discussions indicated that they experienced some transformation in these areas, a longitudinal approach may be necessary to determine how girls' perceptions of the world change due to their participation in the curriculum program.

4. For some, critical consciousness can be deeply personal and quite emotional. Processing and thinking differently about the world around us is not an instant process. It takes time. Talking about it with others and putting words to those experiences can take even longer.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research was successfully implemented in this study and yielded rich data about participants' experiences with relational aggression. According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research is positioned firmly on the "idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (p. 3). Because this study was designed to explain the extent to which girls' interaction within a curriculum program impacted participants' development of consciousness about relational aggression and the methods they developed to address it in their own lives, the research process

honored the voices of the young girls as the most important way to measure their emerging conscientization with respect to the issue. Audio recordings were a simple way of collecting the data, which was subsequently transcribed and coded. However, in future studies, modifying data collection to include video recordings of participants would be highly recommended. So many nuanced experiences took place over the course of the sessions in this study, which had a significant impact on the dialogical space of this study impossible to capture on a recording device. Video recordings would have provided the opportunity to code for nonverbal phenomena as well, which would have provided a multidimensional perspective on what took place over the course of the study. Such an expanded approach to this study could have provided even more depth on what should be central to our work as educators—namely, the well being and empowerment of young girls in our society.

Epilogue

I have had few experiences that have struck me to my core as did my active engagement with these 17 incredible young women. As a woman who was targeted by relational aggression a large part of my adolescent life, I experienced a transformative moment in the undergraduate women's studies class that I mentioned briefly in the introductory chapter of this study. In my life, I had never had discussions that provided me the language to critically discuss how women in the world are systematically subordinated and subjugated in every society across the planet. I never had the opportunity to engage the issue of sexism in the world around me, in order to more deeply understand where that situated me as a woman in this society. I never understood that when the men in my life put me down and made fun of me because I was a girl that

they were wrong to do so. I never knew how powerful a woman could be when she developed the language to talk about what is right and what is wrong when it comes to equality among sexes.

I feel blessed that I was allowed to witness those early moments of these young girls' critical awakening in a gendered world. Still, it is with mixed feelings that I reflect on the experience and the findings of this research study. On one hand, it saddens me that we still need to have these discussions with our sisters, daughters, and students, who live in a world where women still earn 77 cents to every dollar a man makes (even less if you are a minority woman) and where one in five women will be raped in their lifetime. On the other hand, I am hopeful—knowing that every girl who participates in this program or one like it embarks on that critical journey of self-discovery and the process of building stronger alliances, whereby women and girls can support one another in less adversarial relationships.

Appendix A

Curriculum Program

The *From Adversaries to Allies* Program is a copyrighted material.

To purchase the program, visit http://www.hghw.org/content/curricula-guidebooks

(A temporary copy will be made available to committee members for the purposes of reviewing the procedures implemented and data collected in this research study)

Appendix B

Facilitator's Guide

A Facilitator's Guide to Being a Muse is a copyrighted material.

To view the Table of Contents, visit

http://www.hghw.org/sites/default/files/images/BAM-Table-of-Contents.pdf

To view an excerpt from the guide, visit

http://www.hghw.org/sites/default/files/images/BAM-Facilitation-Tips.pdf

To purchase a copy, visit

http://hghw.org/store#ecwid:category=400350&mode=product&product=1544835

(A temporary copy will be made available to committee members for the purposes of reviewing the procedures implemented and data collected in this research study)

Appendix C

Letter of Permission

February 20, 2013

To whom it May Concern,

Mrs. Casey Quirarte, both a current employee at   and a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University, has requested permission to conduct research at our   campus. As the Head of School for   , I have reviewed the following information regarding Mrs. Quirarte's proposed study:

- The research background including the purpose of the study towards investigating the impact of a program designed to decrease relational aggression in adolescent girls on students who participate.
- The research questions including how the program might impact critical consciousness about relational aggression and impact on students' perceptions of healthy friendships.
- Selection of student participants including seventh grade girls in the gender-specific Life Skills classes whose parents have consented to their participation in the program.
- The process of documenting field notes and observations within the context of the classroom where this program will be implemented.
- The process of consent, assent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, risks and benefits of the study.
- Copies of the "Informed Consent," "Student Assent," and Application to the IRB were shared with the school.

Based on the importance of this topic and potential benefits, as Head of School, permission is granted for Mrs. Quirarte to conduct her research on our campus and with our teachers in the spring of 2013.

If there are any further consent or permission forms needed from our school, please let me know via email   or phone: .

Sincerely,

Head of School

Appendix D

Letter to Parents

February 21, 2013

Dear 7th grade families,

We are very excited to have been able to recruit a new teacher this year, Ms. Casey Quirarte, who not only is an outstanding and experienced history teacher, but also is completing a doctorate of education degree in the study of adolescent relationships. As part of her doctoral program at Loyola Marymount University, Ms. Quirarte has helped to develop our 7th grade Life Skills program in line with the most current research on adolescent development. During the third trimester of the Life Skills program, 7th grade students will be participating in the pilot and evaluation of a program that Ms. Quirarte is researching for her doctoral work. Ms. Quirarte will teach one section of the class, and XXX XXXX will teach the others.

In order for your child to be placed in the section of the class where research will be conducted, a parent/guardian will need to give his or her consent on the consent form, and your child will need agree to participate as well. Both classes will be engaging with the same curriculum program. However, if you do not provide consent or if your child chooses not to participate in the study Ms. Quirarte is conducting, your child will be placed in the section with , who is not reporting her findings about her class. If at any time your child chooses that he or she will no longer participate, the student will be moved into the non-research section of the class.

If students choose not to participate, he/she will be placed in the section of the class with , where research is not being conducted. You will need to give your consent, or state that you do not want your child to participate before a class assignment can be made for your child. If, at any time, your child wishes to discontinue participation in the study, he or she will be given the opportunity to leave the class without penalty. Ms. Quirarte will be available to answer any questions you may have about the study, how it will be conducted, or students' options for class selection.

As part of her doctoral research, Ms. Quirarte will write about the work students do and discuss her field notes from working and talking with the students. She will be collecting data by keeping detailed researcher field notes (both audio and written recordings), observations and reflection journals, and day-to-day qualitative data necessary to investigate the experiences of participants throughout the duration of the program. This data will be analyzed and written about as a part of Ms. Quirarte's dissertation and doctoral research. She will not identify the school, nor any of the students, in her writing. She will also report her findings to the school administration and make recommendations for the type of program the school might move forward with in the future. She will be available to share her work with members of the faculty, administrators, and parents interested in learning more about the work she is doing.

Please notify me, Ms. Quirarte, or the school:
-if you have any concerns or questions,
-if you would prefer that your child's work and participation not be included in Ms. Quirarte's research, or
-if you would like your child to be excused from this program.

This letter includes two forms that Ms. Quirarte is required to provide you with, in accordance with the Loyola Marymount University School of Education Internal Review Board ethics review committee. Please sign and return one; the other is for your records. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have any additional questions. In order to place your child in the appropriate section for this course, please reply no later than March 1, 2013. We appreciate your attention to this document, and your help in providing our students with this wonderful opportunity.

Thank you for your support,
XXX XXXXXXX

Assistant Head of School

Appendix E

Assent Form

From Adversaries to Allies
Student Assent Form

Dear Students,

My name is Mrs. Quirarte. I am trying to learn more about a program designed to help develop healthy relationships because I think it is a wonderful opportunity for middle school students, and I think it could improve our Life Skills classes to be more meaningful for students. My research will be evaluating the impact of a program on the students who participate, and make recommendations for how can improve or choose to use it in the Life Skills classes at our school. I will also be writing about the program in my dissertation, a paper I will write for my doctoral degree. If you would like, you can be in my study.

If you decide you want to participate in my study here is a little information about what you can expect. The program we will be participating in is called *From Adversaries to Allies*, and it is specifically designed for middle school girls. Although it is taking place as a part of the traditional Life Skills class, it is a different kind of class because it is about having great and thoughtful conversations about meaningful topics. That means students in class will have a lot of power to determine where our discussions go. I hope our class will be a space for you and your classmates to talk openly and critically in some issues facing teens in 2013. The goal of the program is to improve our friendships and personal relationships.

If you choose to participate in the class, you will be completing a variety of activities designed and having great conversations with your classmates. Each day in class, you will be able to provide feedback on what you thought about the class/es before. Part of my research will be keeping written and audio notes in order to keep track of our thoughts as we go through this program together. I will use my notes to keep record all of our ideas and recommendations in order to write about our experiences together in the program. This will be an exciting opportunity because your feedback will be used to make improvements to the program for students in the future.

Other people will not know if you are in my study. I will put things I learn about you together with things I learn about other students, so no one can tell what things came from you. When I tell other people about my research, I will never use your name, so no one can tell whom I am talking about.

A letter has been sent home to parents, with detailed information about my research. If you are receiving this letter, it is because your parents have given their consent for you to participate. However, you get to choose if it is something that you want to do. If you don't want to be in the study, no one will be mad at you. You will be placed in the class with , and you will not be included in my research. If you want to be in the study now and change your mind later, that's OK. You can stop at any time. If, at any time, you choose not to participate any longer, you will be moved to the class with Mrs. Morse. The *From Adversaries to Allies* program will be used in her class too, however, she will not be evaluating the program or writing up her notes about your participation in it.

You can call me if you have questions about the study, or if you decide you don't want to be in the study any more. The school number is and my extension is . You can also email me at . I will give you a copy of this form in case you want to ask questions later.

Agreement

I have decided to be in the study even though I know that I don't have to do it. Mrs. Quirarte has answered all my questions, and I know I can talk to her any time if I have more.

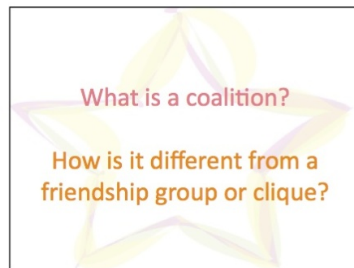
_____________________________ _______________
Signature of Study Participant Date

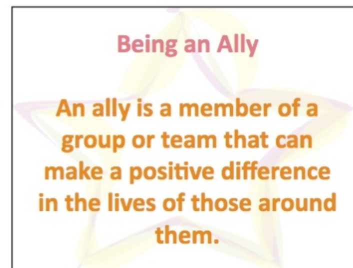
_____________________________ _______________
Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix F

Presentation Slides

3/31/14





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(Due to the copyrighted content included in this slide presentation, a temporary copy of the presentations will be made available to committee members for the purposes of reviewing the procedures implemented and data collected in this research study)

Appendix G

Session 3 Data

The following statements are excerpted directly from the raw data collection from session 3. Below are girls' comments to one another as they were asked to look in the magazines they were given for images that concerned, perplexed, or bothered them:

Shoshanna yells— See there she is! They put her in that pink thing!

Shoshanna, we read this magazine!

No, no, no, it was the same article in another magazine.

Why do you have a different one than us?

'Cause there's two April issues, there's the swim issue and the not swim issue.

I got the bikini issue!

I have that one!

Look at it. It looks so weird!

Oh my god! I have that shirt!

Oh my God! The gap.

What's the deal with the gap again?

Well, there's people and they don't have a gap, but they're getting a gap.

They're changing their teeth?

Yeah.

That is really shocking.

Wait, why are you guys being mean to Lauren what's her name.

What did you say? Because her belly button's weird?

Look at this one!

Oh my God! Those shoes are so cute! I want them.

See what I mean, they have like pad or tampon ads everywhere. They're all pink.

Yeah, they're all pink or yellow, but if they say sport on them they're yellow.

No, playtex sport is pink.

It's pink, yellow, or blue.

"When it comes to protection, don't play around!"

This bathing suit has a bulldog on it, it's perfect for you.

Eww, that's so gross.

Facial tumors.

Oh my god, this is what I wanted.

Kristen, this kind of looks like you in a way.

That's really awkward.

There's so many things here that I can get.

Uh! Duckface!

My dad complains about that all the time!

What's that on her lip?

Ugh! This bothers be so much!

Oh my gosh! This is so awkward!

There are so many things that bother me.

Yeah, I found nine too, what is that?

By a palm tree!

Oh my God! "Cute butt coming soon!"

Ewww.

Appendix H

Smashbook Pages

Today WAS... sucky
bitch.
what's going on?
slut?
what did I do?
does everyone think I'm a bitch?
what?
Oh, like you don't know... SLUT.
like she doesn't know...
what?
why? what have i done?
what's happening?
No, i really don't know
Why are you doing this to me?
Read 11:23PM
would anyone care if i just... disappeared?
My favorite things ABOUT YOU:
1. smile
2. humor
3. hair
4. face
5. every-
6. thing
REASONS WHY WE GET ALONG SO WELL:
· love each other
· lots of love
· BFFS
There's no leg in there!
P.S. Inside Joke!
OUR FAVORITE SNACKS:
· pickles n' peanut butter
· nutella and strawberries
MM's & POPCORN
It drives me CRAZY when you:
Why Are you so Perfect
BFF
Me
When I first met you I thought you were:
A little slut who wants to bang every guy, but she was awsome and a great person to be around.

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