Reading bodies: A case study analysis of adolescent girls' experiences in an after school book group

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Entitled

Reading Bodies: A Case Study Analysis of Adolescent Girls' Experiences in an After School Book Group

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College
ABSTRACT

Reading Bodies: A Case Study Analysis of Adolescent Girls' Experiences in an After School Book Group

by

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In this study, adolescent female readers participated in an after-school literature based discussion group or “Book Group” as we came to call it, reading contemporary young adult novels that deal with issues of the body. The purpose of this study was to examine the adolescent girls’ experiences within the literature discussions, as most studies relating to literature circle discussions, book clubs, or book groups do not focus on the students’ experiences. A related purpose of the study was to investigate how literature based discussion groups reflect and reveal readers’ own identities as well as dominant social discourse about issues of femininity. This study was grounded in several areas of research into best practices in adolescent literacy as well as evolving theories on adolescent bodies as sites inscribed by power, culture, and gender. Findings for the study revealed multiple aspects of girls’ reading and gendered identities as well as issues of conflict within the readers regarding issues related to the body and their appearance.
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This research examines the roles that women might have as mentors to adolescent girls; along the course of my life I was lucky to have female teachers and women in my life who inspired me and who truly affected the course of my life as a reader, a writer, and a young woman. More women should be as lucky to have similar guidance. To Peggy O’Shaughnessy Boyd, who first made me think of myself as a writer and who continually inspired and guided my own teaching of reading and writing; to Cate Siejk, who I largely credit with instilling within me the fire and the awareness that guides me as a feminist; to my Aunt “Tiny” and to my Grandmother who encouraged me for as long as I can remember to pursue an education; and to the ultimate mentor in my life, my mother, who has always believed in me, my writing, my dreams, and my ability to achieve whatever I set out to.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Telling stories, listening to them, and reading them (to oneself or to others) opens a window to other worlds, other persons and other experiences" (Sumara, 1996).

Sumara’s quote describes the power of narrative—the power of the stories we read, we tell, and we share in concert with others. This research in many ways was about stories; together with nine adolescent girls, I spent three months engaged in what we called Book Group, a place where we came together to read stories that interested us, to discuss how these stories spoke to us, and to examine how these stories connected to our own life stories and experiences. This research is inextricably tied to my story of teaching high school English for over a decade and more importantly, the stories and struggles of the students I taught over those years. Thus, this research is heavily embedded in experiences linked to my own students and to my own experiences and theoretical beliefs that evolved over the course of my years teaching and working with high school students. To begin, I’ll describe two separate but individually important stories that occurred within my last year of teaching in a public high school, both of which contributed greatly to the creation of this study.

The first important event possibly occurred because I had one of the best stocked classroom libraries of anyone in my school. I’d spent years acquiring (and reading) young adult literature I thought my students would enjoy. While the required curriculum
of my ninth grade classroom was heavy on the classics, my book shelves were full of modern, young adult titles. I was required to teach Shakespeare and Greek tragedies, and while I enjoyed the classics, I wished there was more time in the required curriculum mandated by my school and my district for young adult titles that I felt might engage reluctant readers. At the same time, I was teaching a course on young adult literature to pre-service teachers at the university and I couldn’t help but escape the irony that I spent several hours each week discussing young adult literature with my adult students while struggling to fit that same subject into my own curriculum at the high school with teenagers. It was not as if I didn’t fit it in—I worked at developing literature circles and other formats to discuss the young adult literature in my classroom. However, young adult literature remained on the margins of the required curriculum. I consoled myself with the fact that many of the students in my classroom were borrowing young adult titles from my bookshelves for independent reading at home and for silent, sustained reading at school.

A small group of girls in one of my classes began rotating books off my shelves through their circle; a phenomenon I found fascinating. Certain books were very popular and the girls began asking me for duplicate copies of “hot” titles. In turn, they shared books from their own personal collections with me. Through this process, the girls and I began a casual, reoccurring dialogue about titles we enjoyed; a few of the girls even started lingering after class regularly to discuss what they were reading with me. As we recommended books to each other, I widened my own reading of young adult literature through the titles they’d read and enjoyed and vice versa. Some of the books they had read multiple times, included novels such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and *Cut* by
Patricia McCormick. A common thread ran through many of the novels they enjoyed; most had female protagonists who were viewed as outsiders or "others" in their schools or communities and many had issues with their bodies. For example *Cut* focuses on a girl’s struggle with "cutting" or self mutilation while *Speak* tells the story of a high school freshman whose friends abandon her after she is, unbeknownst to them, raped at a house party.

These stolen moments after the bell rang gave me a small but intriguing glimpse into these girls’ reading identities and interests. It began to occur to me that making time and space for other opportunities for girls to discuss texts they found meaningful could be powerful, out of school places for student exploration of literature. I wondered how I might be able to create this space for my students.

A second, but perhaps seemingly unrelated event occurred last August, on the first day of the school year, as my sophomore English II students filed in for their first day. When I scanned my course rosters for this English II class, I was excited to see many familiar names on the list, as I’d taught freshman English at the same school the year before. Many of my prior students would be returning to my classroom, including a particularly favorite student of mine, Erica.

Imagine my surprise when Erica showed up for sophomore year sporting an obviously second-trimester pregnant belly on her slight, 100-pound frame. In a decade of teaching high school, it certainly wasn’t the first time I’d had a pregnant student in my class, nor would it likely be the last, but I was still shocked it was Erica. We didn’t talk about it that first day, and actually we didn’t talk about it for a few weeks, until after I had collected the students’ journals for the first time. Erica, who had seemed comfortable
in class and had been welcomed by her former classmates without even a whisper about her pregnancy, had one entry in her journal that troubled me. Apparently she was having issues with a few of her teachers; she felt they didn’t think she belonged back in school. She said a couple of them looked at her in class “like they’d never seen a pregnant girl before,” which was unlikely considering the teen pregnancy statistics in our large, urban school district. Erica and I talked about her journal entry a few days later; she was near tears as she explained to me how several of her teachers would no longer look at her, seeming to want to avoid any glimpses of her pregnant belly. She was considering leaving school, maybe being home schooled or simply earning a G.E.D. in order to avoid the discomfort she felt in so many of her classes. I urged her to stay in school, firm in my belief that who she was as a person and as a student was separate from her pregnancy. Eventually Erica did leave school, transferring to an adult education program, telling me it was just “too hard” to do traditional school. My experience with Erica still lingers with me almost two years later—frequently on my mind as I continue to work with issues of adolescence, gender, and theories on the body.

Somewhere in these two stories lies an interconnection I made during one of my many afternoon “mental debriefings” on the drive home from those long days of teaching school. I couldn’t stop thinking about so many of these issues—these girls who were such avid readers but were so rarely given opportunities to read and enjoy the type of books they loved within school; the limiting notions of what “literature” is and this magnetic pull of the “canon” that I couldn’t seem to escape no matter where I taught; these girls who weren’t seeing their own lives and experiences reflected or acknowledged in their reading or their schooling; girls like Erica who felt their bodies were repugnant to the
very teachers who were supposed to be worried about educating them, and the girls who weren’t pregnant, but still felt their bodies as senses of shame and confusion, or worse yet, as something to be reviled.

As an English teacher, I kept coming back to this issue of reading literature as a way of knowing, but also as a way of challenging what others tell us is true. I remembered those powerful moments of interchange and discussion in my own classroom when we read young adult novels together, discussing them in literature circles or other discussion groups. Could young adult literature offer girls a venue for exploring notions about their bodies as well as the ways bodies are represented in the literature itself? Could literature be a vehicle for critical thought and exploration about these issues of the body that seemed so vital to adolescent girls? My own work with literary theories including reader response, socio-cultural views of literacy, and critical literacy suggested to me that perhaps literature might be a powerful means for exploring these important issues and also for allowing girls a space to voice their thoughts and feelings about literature and about the social messages and discourses surrounding adolescent girls’ bodies and identities.

Early in my career, I was impressed and influenced by research and pedagogy designed to emphasize the student-centered classroom. I spent years involved with readers’ and writers’ workshop approaches, literature based instruction, literature circles, Padeia seminars, and other forms of reader centered instruction. Like many other teachers influenced by the work of theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1982, 1985, 1991, 1995, 2005), reader response theory played an integral role in the construction of my classroom lessons and my approach to teaching literature. Reader response theory,
linked to names including Rosenblatt, Iser (1978, 1980), and Fish (1980), emphasizes the importance of the individual reader and what he or she brings to the text. Reader response criticism rejects the notion that meanings reside solely within texts, and instead focuses on a multi-dimensional, transactional system of meaning making that involves the text, the reader, as well as the social community within which readings occur. Rosenblatt (1978, 1995, 1982, 2005) described this as a transactional theory of reading, emphasizing the unique meaning individual readers bring to their reading of and connections with text. She emphasized the personal nature of each reader’s response as there is “no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual literary works” (1995, p. 24). Meaning then does not reside within the text itself, but rather that meaning is created in a transactional process between reader and text, within the larger social context or as Stanley Fish (1980) described an “interpretive community” such as the literacy classroom.

Rosenblatt’s emphasis on the value of the individual reader and what he or she brings to the text is strongly linked to her theories about the importance of schooling and literature instruction as tools for encouraging and providing democratic practices for students (Rosenblatt, 1978; 1995). Traditional methods of analyzing literature, including the formalist views where meaning resided solely in a text, did not value or acknowledge the vast variety of cultures, backgrounds, and belief systems that individual readers bring to a text. Rosenblatt’s vision of reading response instead emphasized the honoring of difference, the appreciation of diversity. After all, she wrote, “Democracy implies a society of people who, no matter how much they differ from one another, recognize their
common interests, their common goals, and their dependence on mutually honored freedoms and responsibilities" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. xv).

Then, as a doctoral student in literacy, I was introduced to critical literacy. Impressed and inspired by the potential I saw within the tenets of critical literacy, I expanded upon my reader response inspired curriculum to look at texts in new ways. Critical literacy rejects a “banking model” (Freire, 1970) approach to education where teachers merely deposit factual information into students’ intellectual accounts. Critical literacy approaches truth as constructed through experience, as “historical products to be questioned rather than as universal wisdom to be accepted” (Shor, 1992, p. 32). A critical approach moves beyond response; the belief that critical literacy carries transformative properties is deeply rooted in Freire’s description of critical pedagogy as a praxis of reflection and action (Freire, 1970).

The active aspect of critical pedagogy is what intrigued me initially and what seemed to hold such great potential for my own classroom instruction and my students, for “education cannot indulge in intellectualism alone; education has to be linked to action for change” (Kane, 2003, p. 23). Again, like Rosenblatt’s descriptions of literacy classrooms as potential sites of democracy education, I was intrigued by the potential I saw for encouraging my students to take a critical stance about the topics we discussed in my classroom.

Like most teachers, so many aspects of my students’ lives as well as my own experiences as a teacher and later as a scholar, continually shaped my practice and my beliefs. These issues and ideas—my love of young adult literature, my desire to connect with students’ out of school reading experiences, my horror and consternation over the
way I saw girls’ bodies ignored and maligned within the school system, my successes and
struggles as a teacher of language arts, the inspiration I drew for my own instruction from
reader response theory, and later my beginning attempts to move my students to a critical
stance via critical literacy—all combined to bring me to where I was theoretically and
philosophically as I embarked upon my dissertation research. All of these areas have
combined to shape my interests and the design and purpose of this study.

Overview of the Study

In this study, adolescent female readers participated in an after-school literature
based discussion group or “Book Group” as we came to call it, reading contemporary
young adult novels that deal with issues of the body. The purpose of this study was to
examine the adolescent girls’ experiences within the literature discussions, as most
studies relating to literature circle discussions, book clubs, or book groups do not focus
on the students’ experiences. A related purpose of the study was to investigate how
literature based discussion groups reflect and reveal readers’ own identities.
Additionally, this study examined ways in which adolescent girls identified and discussed
dominant social discourses about femininity and being a girl in society today. This
study incorporates several areas of research into best principled practices in adolescent
literacy as well as evolving theories on adolescent bodies as sites inscribed by power,
culture, and gender.
Potential Significance

Although much has been written about the process of literature discussion, literature circles and book groups (Hill, Schlick Noe, & Johnson, 2001; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999; Short & Kaufman, 1999; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003), most of the work in literature discussions focuses on professional and pedagogical advice for teachers using literature circles in their classrooms. This advice includes ways of integrating literature circles into classroom curriculum and practice, as well as analyzing the social dynamics of literature circle discussions. While these resources are valuable to classroom teachers learning to implement literature circles in their classrooms, they do not include detailed reflections regarding how students report their own experiences in literature circle discussions. Students’ responses are often analyzed, but as Alvermann et al (1996, 1999) and Evans (2002) both acknowledge, little has been written about students’ perceptions of their experiences in such literature discussions. Even less is written about high school students’ experiences in literature circle discussions, as the vast majority of scholarship on literature circles concerns itself with either elementary or middle school students (eg. Daniels, 1994; Eeds & Peterson, 1991; Hill, Schlick Noe, & Johnson, 2001; O’Flahavan, 1989; Paratore & McCormack, 1997; Samway et al., 1991; Wieneck & O’Flahavan, 1994). An examination of students’ own perceptions and experiences with literature based discussion groups would add valuable information to the body of research on literature based discussion, most specifically within the area of adolescent literacy response and instruction.

Another important component in this study is the use of young adult literature titles for group reading and discussion. While research shows that young adult literature
is well received by young people (Cart, 1996; Herz & Gallo, 1996), it is still infrequently used in classroom settings, especially at the high school level. Literature selections in high school classrooms are predominately drawn from the literary canon or a pre-established list of required readings, and seldom are high school students given choices about what they will read in schooled settings (Christenbury, 2000; Donelson & Nilsen, 2005; Salvner, 2000). This is despite the fact that research suggests adolescents prefer choices about what they read (Alvermann et al, 1999; Barbieri, 1995; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2001). This study offered adolescent girls opportunities to socially discuss and deconstruct young adult literature that they normally would not be offered within the standard curriculum.

This research study draws upon previous work by Alvermann et al (1996, 1999) to analyze how high school students describe their perceptions and experiences with literature circle discussions, while taking in the unique situation of these literature circles or Book Group as a voluntary, after school program (Alvermann et al, 1999). Although Alvermann’s work does discuss the complex nature of adolescent identity and what it brings to the social context of literacy practices, this study also seeks to examine two areas of research that have not previously been addressed—the intersection of theories on literature response and theories on body identity in adolescents.

Schools and literature classrooms are places where the world of texts and the world of adolescent identity intersect. Recent research in feminist and queer theories, in addition to socio-cultural theory has challenged the notion of the body and the mind as entities that serve merely to produce cognitive and biological processes, but instead bodies are sites of socially inscribed culture and power (Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1990;
Grosz, 1994; McWilliam, 2000; Pillow, 2002). Literature classrooms must examine the ways bodies are dealt with not only in texts that are read, but also the way real flesh and blood adolescent bodies are addressed not only as interpreters and readers of literature, but as embodied examples of culture, power, and gender. Adolescents are specifically important subjects for discussions of the body as they are often defined by their bodily experiences of puberty and development (Lesko, 2001). The topic of the adolescent female body is extremely important as research suggests that adolescent girls especially are affected by issues of the body (Bordo, 1993).

Feminist research has illustrated the power that issues of the body have in forming both adolescent females’ public (schooled) and private identities; public sentiments about what is acceptable with regards to the body strongly shape adolescent females’ sense of self worth and self image (hooks, 1990; Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 2006). Recent research suggests that discussion based forums can open up spaces for girls to critically examine popular notions of the body as well as their own experiences and thoughts about their own bodies (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001). For this study, attention to young adult literature and its treatment of body issues such as teen pregnancy, self mutilation, adolescent sexuality, body image, eating disorders, etc. helped facilitate an examination of ways in which authentic, critical discussion of literature can foster new ways of examining issues of adolescent identity and the body.

Theoretical Framework

This focuses on the experiences of adolescent girls as they read and discussed young adult literature dealing with issues of the body common to adolescent girls.

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Drawing on socio-cultural, social constructivist, and feminist theories, this study is grounded in the belief that literacy experiences are socially embedded within historical, cultural, and gendered situations. Under this definition, literacy is not a prescribed set of skills such as decoding or producing the written word, but is socially constructed behavior (Bakhtin, 1981; Brandt, 2001; Gee, 1999, 2001). Thus, the participants' readings of stories as well as their individually narrated tales of their experiences within the study reflect and reveal not only their own individual experience, but also reflect the social and material world in which the girls live, learn, and are embodied. Just as literacy experiences are grounded in social constructs, so are adolescent identities (Britzman, 1991; Sumara, 1998). Gender is a crucial lens through which literacy experiences can and should be examined; as discursive practices such as reading reveal important assumptions about gender and power within the world of literacy education (Weiler & Middleton, 1999).

This study was qualitative in nature, as qualitative research supports a constructivist view of reality, knowledge, experience and identity. Under a constructivist view of reality, the world is socially constructed, complexly organized, fluid and ever-changing (Glesne, 1999). While understanding reality as socially situated and constructed, qualitative research seeks to understand the experiences and perceptions of individuals, groups, and cultures (Glesne, 1999). Within qualitative research, multiple traditions of inquiry exist (Creswell, 1998). As this study seeks to understand and explain the experiences of adolescent females engaged in literature discussions about young adult literature that deals with issues of the body, this study draws upon phenomenology, as phenomenology concerns itself with the lived experiences of several
individuals about a phenomenon or social situation (Creswell, 1998). However, this study was not primarily phenomenological in nature, but rather was a case study, which also allows examination of experiences relating to the group of girls as a whole, but also individual girls’ experiences as well.

In order to understand and mediate the girls’ experiences within the literature discussions, multiple factors needed to be considered. These include constructivist and social constructivist notions of how our experiences are formed. Constructivists adhere to the importance of understanding experience through the point of view of those experiencing or living a situation (Evans, 2002; Schwandt, 1994). However, the girls’ experiences were shaped by many factors, including the social environment created by the Book Group. Thus, a social constructivist framework was used to analyze the girls’ experiences. This framework will support the multiple aspects of the study, as literacy, identity, and experience are all shaped by social constructs (Sumara, 1998). Vygotsky’s (1978) theories on construction of knowledge contribute greatly to a socially constructivist view on literacy experiences, as he suggests that in order to understand cognitive development and mental functions, the social environment in which learning takes place must be examined.

Finally, as stated earlier, literary theories including reader response theory, feminist literary theory, and critical literacy informed and guided the construction of the literature circle groups and continually inform my own understanding of literature response and instruction. My own understandings of and practices incorporating reader response theory and literature based instruction undergird this study. I understand reader response theory to honor and acknowledge readers as they contribute their own voices,
experiences and opinions to the literature classroom. I firmly believe reading is a “way of knowing” about the world (Rosenblatt, 2005).

Reader response classrooms honor and promote the value of the individual reader and what he or she brings to the text; aesthetic readings of texts are not merely personal stories and personal tales of how each reader relates to a character or a text; readers produce individual readings that reflect their own cultures, values, social backgrounds, and unique sense of the world and literature. Rather than viewing reader response theory, socio-cultural theories on literacy and critical literacy as mutually exclusive views on literacy and literary instruction, I view each of these theories as holding the potential for contributing to a holistic, student-empowering, democracy promoting way of experiencing and teaching literature to and with adolescent students.

Research Questions

This research explored the following questions:

1) What are the perceptions of adolescent females about the experience of participating in literature based discussions of young adult literature featuring issues tied to the body?

2) How do literature based discussion groups reveal adolescent girls’ understandings of their own complex identities as gendered readers?

3) Can literature based discussions provide spaces for adolescent girls to identify and critique socially situated discourses regarding issues associated with femininity and the body?
Conclusion

Recent research by Shirley Brice Heath (2000) argues that “disadvantaged” adolescents learn and develop through involvement in non-school affiliated after school programs in ways they do not through the traditional school day. Heath especially emphasized the successes of “creative youth-based non school organizations and enterprises” as being due in large part to their ability to “recognize young people as resources, not problems” (2000, p. 21). These findings do not surprise me, but rather reflected and guided my own desire to create an out of school space for adolescent girls to come together to talk about their books, their views, their bodies, their readings in ways they are often unable to within the traditional school day. This study is also deeply rooted in my belief that research into adolescent literacies needs to feature students’ own voices about their experiences. Students need opportunities to voice their experiences about their reading, their worlds, their concerns, and the issues and discourses that shape their ever-evolving identities and sense of self. Researchers, teachers, and policy makers have much to learn from the voices and experiences of these adolescents. Finally, this study is rooted in the desires, concerns and readings of actual students I taught. This study was not conceived merely through a teacher’s or a researcher’s desire to examine girls’ reading experiences; this study arose from the experiences of the girls in my classroom, girls who were avid readers of books they never got to read in the language arts classroom. This study was inspired by the girls I taught; girls who needed places for their voices to be heard, their reading to be honored, and their bodies to be accepted.
If we took seriously the idea that adolescents are sophisticated meaning-makers who use various texts to represent or construct identities and subject positions in the world, then we might not neglect to examine *how* they make those meanings. We might find that we could learn something important about meaning-making through literacy as well (Moje, 2002, p. 111).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

For this research, I have read widely in the fields of feminist pedagogy, adolescent literacy, young adult literature, reader response theory, critical literacy, adolescent identity, and body theories to inform my thoughts and practice. This research seeks to draw connections between these varied fields of research and is steeped in my own readings, reflections, and conclusions about the importance of examining and addressing the experiences of adolescent girls and their reading practices as well as my growing awareness and concern with how issues of the body affect and shape girls’ schooled and out of schooled identities and experiences. The review of relevant literature includes my groundings in feminist pedagogy and literary theories such as reader response theory, socio-cultural views of literacy, and critical literacy, all of which inform the study’s use of young adult literature, literature circle discussions, and research into current “best practices” in adolescent literacy. The second half of the literature review connects to the issues of adolescent girls’ identities, especially how these identities are shaped by prevailing discourses on femininity, the body, and female sexuality. Finally, I will examine issues of connecting female adolescent identity and experiences of the body to curriculum for public schooling.
Feminist Research and Pedagogy

Feminist pedagogy has continually informed and shaped my work as both a teacher and a researcher long before I recognized the term "feminist pedagogy." I have self-identified as a feminist since my undergraduate years, and knew that my feminist viewpoints affected my teaching from the very beginning. However, it was years later before I learned the formal name for this intersection of teaching and feminism. In selecting this topic, this study of girls' experiences, girls' identities, girls' literacies, and girls' bodies, I am motivated by principles of feminism. The impetus for this work comes from my experiences and struggles to acknowledge and meet the needs of the female adolescents I spent years teaching. More specifically, it is inspired by interactions with girls like "Erica" who felt their bodies rejected by schooling, by girls like that small cadre of freshmen who lingered after class to talk and to share their own reading practices with me. This research then is grounded in the relationships and experiences of my teaching, of the relationships I made with many adolescent girls over the years. Olesen (1998) contends that feminist qualitative research is inherently centered around and embedded within the framework of experience and relationships. Highlighting, respecting, and honoring the experiences of young women as readers and as embodied, gendered individuals were key components of this research. Feminist research seeks to tell the experiences of real women, something this study strives to do with young women. Feminist research is concerned with "how voices of participants are heard, with what authority, and in what form" (Olesen, 1998, p. 318).

Feminist pedagogy challenges traditional models of schooling and the inherent systems of power within schools (Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Commeyras et al, 1996;
Hauser & Merrero, 1998; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). "Such classrooms are concerned with the liberatory potential of validating students' own perceptions of the world through a curriculum that includes women's lives and contributions" (Hauser & Merrero, 1998, p. 164). This pedagogy, like this study, is concerned with centering learning at least partially around students' own questions and concerns, their own reading choices and interests, and certainly from their experiences (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). The girls' experiences, concerns, and my own experiences and concerns as a teacher of adolescent girls firmly ground this study.

This study sought to fill a gap I saw in the curriculum offered to young women in the high schools I taught at. Women's studies courses exist within universities, but rarely do adolescent girls get opportunities to reflect upon feminism and issues that affect them as gendered individuals within the traditional high school curriculum. Few girls' groups that support and introduce feminist principles exist for adolescent girls today. bell hooks (2000) describes how feminist pedagogy is largely absent in the lives of adolescent students in junior highs and high schools, ironically only introduced to young women as they are leaving adolescence and its turbulence behind and argues that "mass-based feminism for critical consciousness is needed" for adolescent girls (p. 113). As a woman who didn't encounter feminist thoughts or writings until at the university myself, I agree with hooks that "older feminist thinkers cannot assume that young females will just acquire knowledge of feminism along the way to adulthood. They require guidance" (hooks, 2000, p. 17). Although limited amounts of empirical research exist on feminist practices in secondary classrooms exist (Barbieri, 1995; Bruce, 2003; Harper 1998, 2000;
Hubbard, 1998; Joseph, 2005), I believe secondary classrooms and the communities of high schools can offer rich opportunities for providing this “guidance” that hooks calls for.


erie Theory

Reader Response Theory

In many high school classrooms today, literature instruction consists of purely modernist readings of texts, where reading and literature instruction center around the concept that true meaning is found within the text itself (Honig, 1995; Karolides, 2000). Based upon this approach, secondary literature instruction primarily focuses upon reading comprehension and literary analysis of texts for elements such as theme, irony, personification, etc. Many teachers present literature instruction in a “banking model” approach (Freire, 1970) where teachers tell students what texts mean and students then regurgitate the information for the end of unit test. Little opportunity is given for students to make personal connections or textual observations that are not in line with the teacher’s or some other “expert’s” predetermined sense of what the text really means.

In contrast to the modernist approach, reader response theory and transactional approaches to literature argue against this notion of privileging one form of reading above another—the idea that factual or what Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1995, 2005) describes as efferent readings are somehow superior to more personal, subjective, reflective readings. Instead, Rosenblatt’s work, perhaps the best known of the reader response theorists, describes readings as a constant negotiation between text and reader, a continuum between efferent and aesthetic, personal readings of texts. The Efferent-
Aesthetic Continuum describes the multiple facets of literature response and discussion, with particular emphasis on what the reader brings to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995, 2005).

Critical, close, textual readings are vital in Rosenblatt's vision of reading response; students must look closely at texts, bring their own sense of identity to their readings of these texts, yet also critically analyze texts for biases and inaccuracies. Rosenblatt’s critique of traditional reading instruction that only focused on literal comprehension strategies, privileging factual efferent responses over subjective aesthetic responses was that education was producing generations of students who simply regurgitated the written word, without actually thinking about whether texts were accurate or fair. Purely efferent readings produce what Rosenblatt (2005) described as “shallow,” “unquestioning,” and “passive” readers.

Literature in a reader response based classroom then becomes a “way of knowing” for students, helping students make connections between the literature they read in school and the larger world around them (Rosenblatt, 2005; Short, 1999). This way of knowing contributes to the notion of reading as a social activity that has the potential to revitalize democratic practices in American schools (Pradl, 1996). Current practices that emphasize meanings as existing solely within texts, neglecting the influence of the reader and the social setting, and reading instruction that relies almost entirely upon efferent ways of reading texts discount students’ own ways of knowing.

In undemocratic classrooms, driven as they tend to be by facts and tests, reading poems or novels is often reduced to the mere transfer of information. In contrast, democratic teaching fosters multifaceted
readings, and discussions are built on layers of agreement and
disagreement. Literature education that promotes transformation always
entails some significant change in perspective (Pradl, 1996, p. 10).

Socio Cultural Theories

Several recent critiques of how teachers have “taken up” reader response
in their classroom literature instruction highlights the privileging of the personal
response, or what Pirie (1997) calls the “cult of the individual.” This research,
derived from socio-cultural theories, calls for literary response to greater
acknowledge the profound ways in which readers’ identities and stances are
affected and mediated by larger social and cultural contexts in which the reader
lives (Beach, 2000; Beach & Myers, 2001; Franzak, 2006; Lewis, 2000;
McLaughlin, 2004; Pirie, 1997; Sumara, 2002b). This work encourages teachers
and students to examine where their reading stances derive from. Sumara (2002a)
describes this as the work of training students and teachers to become “literary
anthropologists” who examine their own experiences and social settings to
describe the commonalities and perhaps more importantly, the differences
between their lived worlds and the worlds of text. Through such critical
examinations of texts, students have powerful opportunities to examine the ways
in which text worlds are constructed but also the underlying social contexts and
discourses that frame their own lived world realities.

Students also have powerful opportunities under socio-culturally based
response strategies to examine, question, and challenge each other’s stances
(Sumara, 2002b). This approach gives teachers powerful ways of confronting and
deconstructing reader responses that might be viewed as sexist, racist or limiting (Mellor & Patterson, 2001, 2004). This process makes explicit for students how responses are not only personal, but politically and socially influenced.

**Critical Literacy and the Critical Stance**

Recent research in poststructural, critical, and cultural studies fields has illustrated that we cannot look simply at students’ personal responses to literature, but must focus on the larger social, cultural, and historical confines within which texts are written, read, and examined in classrooms today (Davies, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Luke, 1988; Mellor & Patterson, 2000, 2004; Pirie, 1997). Research linking theoretical stances such as poststructuralism and critical literacy illustrates how high school English classrooms have powerful opportunities to develop students who challenge texts and read critically (Mellor & Patterson, 2000, 2004). When reading from a critical stance, students move beyond attempting to make meaning from texts to actually critiquing texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997; McLaughlin, 2004). Students reading from a critical stance are able to pose important questions when examining a text, such as whose voices are represented, whose voices are silenced, and for what particular audience a text is designed and for what purposes. They are also able to identify and view texts as social constructions to be deconstructed and critiqued (Franzak, 2006; Leland et al, 1999; McLaughlin, 2004).

A literature-based Language Arts curriculum requires more than the inclusion of quality literature; it requires a shift in theoretical perspective regarding the teaching of English/Language Arts. The melding of teacher, students, and texts in literature classrooms provides ample opportunities for exploring literature and other written and multimedia texts from a critical viewpoint. Teachers who are well versed in theories of
response, to include reader response theories on stances as well as socio-cultural views on reading, can begin to implement critical literacy practices by encouraging students to move beyond efferent and aesthetic readings to critical readings of texts (Franzak, 2006; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin, 2004). Creating a classroom atmosphere that fosters critical literacy is a process—one that is constantly evolving as teachers develop theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and experiences that they can bring to their students and their lessons (Comber, 2001; McLaughlin, 2004).

An extension and outgrowth of Rosenblatt’s writings on the Efferent-Aesthetic Continuum (2004) builds upon her theories of stances or “aspects of consciousness” (2002). While the efferent stance is largely associated with factual readings for information, the aesthetic stance is associated with more emotional, subjective responses. Rosenblatt emphasizes that rarely is a reading purely efferent or purely aesthetic, that as readers we combine both stances in most readings, depending upon our needs as readers and our particular time and place (Rosenblatt, 2002). Rosenblatt explains stance as “basically an expression of purpose” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 275). Some modern researchers are suggesting that a third stance that can be suggested by Rosenblatt’s work and also by literary theories associated with feminist, post-colonial, cultural studies, etc. is the “critical stance” (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin, 2004).

When reading from a critical stance, students move beyond attempting to make meaning from texts, to actually critiquing texts (Luke & Freebody, 1999; McLaughlin, 2004). Students reading from a critical stance are able to pose important questions when examining a text, such as whose voices are represented, whose voices are silenced, for what particular audience is a text designed and for what purposes (Franzak, 2006; Leland

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et al, 1999; McLaughlin, 2004; O’Neill, 1993). Students who read from a critical stance do not simply read a text, they begin to “read the world” (Freire, 1970). In other words, students are able to look beyond the literal level of the text to critically examine the purpose, the authorship, and the agendas a text may contain. A critical stance encourages students to combine the knowledge they gain from both efferent and aesthetic readings of texts as they become text critics—capable of evaluating and critiquing information sources (McLaughlin, 2004). This third stance, the critical stance, asks students to take their efferent knowledge and their own aesthetical, personal readings and begin to look for additional readings of the texts and literature—to examine multiple perspectives and understandings of the information (Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin, 2004).

There is much currently being written about teachers using traditional literature textbooks, young adult novels, and even children’s picture books to effectively weave critical literacy throughout the required literature curriculum of the high school classroom (Alsup, 2003; Bean & Moni, 2003; Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002; Comber et al, 2001; Leland et al, 1997; McDaniel, 2004; McLaughlin, 2004; Stokes, 1997; Young, 2001). Within secondary classrooms, young adult literature often contains themes that provide powerful opportunities for analyzing and critiquing social issues and situations familiar to teens’ lives (Alsup, 2003). Mellor & Patterson (2000, 2004) have written about the power of post structural and critical approaches to literature in high school classrooms, emphasizing how critical practices offer opportunities to deconstruct racist, sexist, and oppressive readings of texts. They speak with the authority gleaned from decades of work negotiating literature discussions with high school students and include both
theoretical and practical insights for teaching not only new literacies and young adult literature, but also traditional canonical works, from a critical literacy perspective.

Adolescent Literacy

Although this study was designed to take place outside of the traditional school day and the constraints of classroom practice, it was still grounded in several key areas of rationale derived from what theory and research suggest are “best practices” for adolescent literacy instruction:

- Approaches to literature in secondary classroom today need to reflect and address the unique nature of adolescent identity.
- Literature-based instruction in secondary schools should involve quality literary choices, including literature designed especially for young adults.
- Literature instruction also must reflect the diversity and rich differences (in gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, etc.) of contemporary classrooms.
- Literature instruction should provide students with skills to move beyond comprehension and literary analysis to include both personally powerful connections to text while at the same time valuing the multiple perspectives other readings bring to the understanding of literature.
- Literature instruction should encourage students to take a critical stance about what they read.
- Literature instruction should allow links to contemporary students’ experiences with multiple forms of literacy—including media and technology.

Although policy makers and legislators often neglect attending to the vast differences in adolescent identity when they create “one size fits all” programs and tests, adolescence, like all periods of human development, involves huge differences in individual experiences, beliefs, and learning. Attention to individual difference is key for educators working with secondary students. After all, “who students are influences how they interact, respond, and learn in classrooms,” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 229).

Many factors impact adolescent identity; one in particular this study examined is the role of gender on identity, as this study exclusively examined the experiences of adolescent girls. Literacy practices are integrally tied to identity. Gee (1999) describes language and discourse as an identity kit; language and literacy practices help shape how we see, believe, think, speak, and recognize ourselves and others.

Research shows that often students who teachers assume are resistant to literacy experiences and practices are rather only resistant to “schooled” notions of literacy (Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000; Moje, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Conceptions of adolescent literacy today must also include recognition of the rich and varied ways students engage in literacy practices outside of school; these practices often include video games, magazines, Internet and multimedia reading, blogging, texting, emailing, etc. (Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Moje et al, 2000; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Learning to read and reading skills can no longer be tied to solely traditional, “bookish” activities associated with most high school literature classes. Students need opportunities to connect out of school literacies, interests and skills to the world of the classroom.
Secondary schools “need to focus on the development of caring relationships that make spaces for young people to inquire, speak, read, write, and perform what they are interested in and care about” (Moje, 2000, p. 4). Adolescents’ literacy experiences are strongly linked to their identities, which is why attention to and recognition of the vast array of out of school literacy practices and interests students engage in must be acknowledged (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Moje, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2002; O’Brien, 2001). Describing theories of youth culture, Moje (2002) also calls for further research into what she calls the “in-between spaces” adolescents travel, resisting the notions of describing literacies as “schooled” vs. “out of schooled.” In this way we can “understand more about conventional literacy processes and about how new literacies are invented and transformed in hybrid spaces” (2002, p. 118).

Research has shown us that limited, modernist, “one right answer” approaches to literacy are shallow and do not promote adolescent literacy (Campbell, Donahue, Reese & Phillips, 1996; Taylor et al, 1999). High stakes testing has threatened many authentic approaches to literature instruction, limits teacher and student choice of reading materials, and constrains student voices (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Madaus, 1998). Yet, research into best practices for adolescent literacy shows that discussion based strategies are highly linked to student achievement (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Langer et al (2003) discovered that successful strategies for working with all students, including at-risk students, involved helping them see connections between their own lives and experiences with texts, and allowing students space and opportunity to critically discuss these connections.
This study took place outside of the traditional school day, but incorporated research based recommendations on what best practices for adolescent literacy are today. Prior studies of students’ out of school literature discussions such as Alvermann, et al. (1999) and Monseau (2000) have included findings that can positively affect both adolescents’ schooled and unschooled literacies. The construction of the group as an after school, voluntary practice was also designed in the hopes of helping adolescent girls more closely link their literacy experiences with other aspects of their “real world” lives.

Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature was a critical element in this study, as the girls read and discussed young adult novels that dealt with issues of the body and embodied adolescent experiences. Young adult literature has powerful potential for encouraging reflective, critical readings (Alsup, 2003; Bean & Moni, 2003; Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002; Young, 2001). Although many young adult novels originally were scorned by critics, and criticized as being too bold because they dared to deal frankly and graphically with tough social issues and sexual themes, these pieces of literature are widely popular and enthusiastically received by most adolescent readers (Cart, 1996; Herz & Gallo, 1996). Some researchers contend that young adult literature has powerful implications for the construction of female sexuality and body image in adolescents and should be taught in women’s studies and sociology departments and not only in children’s or young adult literature courses in education departments (Younger, 2003). Young adult literature, although written by adults, is designed for an adolescent audience and thus many teenagers find representations of adolescent issues and concerns that they can relate to.
within its pages (Bean & Moni, 2003; Herz & Gallo, 1996; Younger, 2003). For example, many teen girls turn to young adult fiction as one of the few places they can read about girls who are represented as complex, sexual beings (Younger, 2003). Young adult literature today also presents a much greater opportunity for including multicultural perspectives in classroom literacy experiences than the traditional "junior canon" that is so often taught in secondary English classroom.

While research shows that young adult literature is well received by young people, it is still infrequently used in classroom settings, especially at the secondary level. Literature selections in high school English classrooms are predominately drawn from the literary canon or a pre-established list of required readings, and seldom are high school students given choices about what they will read in schooled settings (Christenbury, 2000; Donelson & Nilsen, 2005; Salvner, 2000). This study offered students opportunities to socially discuss and deconstruct young adult literature that they normally would not be offered within the standard curriculum.

Young adult literature was selected as the focus for the Book Group for several reasons. Young adult literature features almost exclusively young adult protagonists, allowing readers to read stories similar to their own realities. The young adult novel is frequently referred to as the "problem novel," largely due to the vast number of social issues featured in the genre. Young adult literature then can offer powerful opportunities to critically analyze how social issues are situated within the literature, especially those concerned with the body. Issues such as body image, sexual experiences, homosexuality, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy, racism, dealing with disabilities, and other important
topics that are linked to the body itself can commonly be found in contemporary young adult literature (Andrews, 1998; Prater, 2000; Swartz, 2003; Younger, 2003).

Young adult literature can still be problematic. Studies analyzing the depictions of teenaged girls in young adult fiction revealed that many of the dominant societal discourses about beauty, sexuality, and thinness are routinely played out in these texts (Younger, 2003). Younger (2003) draws correlations in her work to issues of power and agency that are linked to the character's attractiveness and weight; thinner characters are often portrayed as powerful and in control, while larger characters are seen as both passive and sexually irresponsible. Body image and other issues having negative impacts upon girls' sense of self often play out in young adult texts that feature female protagonists. These themes can offer powerful opportunities for critical discussion and critique.

Literature Circles

The initial design for Book Group was inspired by my past classroom experience using literature circles as a means of student-led, literature based discussion. Literature circles promote a student-centered approach to literature and invoke multiple readings of texts, providing opportunities for students to engage in many of the best practices for adolescent literacy discussed previously (Alvermann & Young, 1996; Evans, 2002; Eeds & Peterson, 1990). Literature circles are small discussion groups (usually containing between four to six members) formed around a common book choice, in which students analyze and discuss various facets of the book they are reading. (Multiple types of "text" can be used for common readings, although most commonly literature is chosen.) Key
components to successful literature circles have been offered in many professional and practitioner-oriented texts. The general consensus on the definition of literature circles is:

• Students choose their own reading materials. (This may be from a pre-selected group of novels/books that a teacher provides. Some level of student choice must be involved though.)

• Small temporary groups are formed, based upon book choice.

• Different groups may read different books. (For example, in a classroom anywhere from 2-6 different titles might be being read by different groups.)

• Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.

• Students may use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion.

• Discussion topics are generated organically—they originate with the students.

• Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome.

• The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group-member or instructor.

• Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation.


Although much has been written about the process of literature discussions, literature circles, and book groups (Hill, Johnson, & Schlick Noe, 2005; Hill, Schlick Noe, & Johnson, 2001; Peterson & Eeds, 1990; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999; Short & Kaufman, 1999; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003), most of the work in literature discussions focuses on professional and pedagogical advice for teachers using literature circles in
their classrooms. That is, ways of integrating literature circles into classroom curriculum and practice, as well as analyzing the social dynamics of literature circle discussions. While these resources are valuable to classroom teachers beginning to implement literature circles in their classrooms, they do not include detailed reflections regarding how students report their own experiences in literature circle discussions. Students’ responses are often analyzed, but as Alvermann et al (1996, 1999) and Evans (2002) both write, little has been written about students’ perceptions of their experiences in such literature discussions. Even less is written about high school students’ experiences in literature circle discussions, as the vast majority of scholarship on literature circles concerns itself with either elementary or middle school students (eg. Daniels, 1994; Eeds & Peterson, 1991; Hill, Johnson, & Schlick Noe, 2005; Hill, Schlick Noe, & Johnson, 2001; O’Flahavan, 1989; Paratore & McCormack, 1997; Samway et al., 1991; Wieneck & O’Flahavan, 1994). This study then fills a gap in the literature, as it seeks to engage high school adolescent females in literature circle discussions and deals primarily with the experiences of the adolescents within these discussion groups.

Adolescent Female Identity

Poststructural, socio-cultural and feminist theories on identity emphasize the dynamic, fluid, ever evolving nature of human identity. Adolescent girls’ identities are multi-faceted and what Michelle Fine (1988) calls “kaleidoscope identities.” Adolescence has often been viewed in overly simplistic ways, lumping “teenagers” together. Much research into adolescent female identity has neglected the actual multiple-layered and constantly evolving notions of identity. In addition, insufficient
attention is often paid to the variety of social factors and discourses that shape individual adolescent’s identities (Pastor, McCormick and Fine, 1996; Phillips, 1998). In *The Girls Report*, Phillips (1998) discusses how so often complex issues of adolescent sense of self, meaning making, and identity development is “too often collapsed into an oversimplified concept of self esteem” (p. 6).

Feminist research attempts to offer a counter discourse to oversimplified notions of adolescent identity. Society and schools continue to reinforce notions of hegemonic femininity to adolescent girls, the notion that there is only one way to be seen as naturally feminine or “normal.” This includes aspects such as how girls and women should and should not “feel, behave and think regarding themselves, their own bodies, their roles in relationships, and their responses to expectations about men and boys” (Tolman, 2006, p. 76). Researchers have analyzed how girls employ what Frederickson and Roberts (1997) describe as self-objectification theory, where adolescent girls learn how to form themselves into sexual objects to be viewed by others, and by themselves. Adolescence is a time when girls often learn to suppress emotions, especially negative emotions such as anger to form themselves as “nice” or “ladylike” (Brown, 1998). Hegemonic femininity demands a lack of agency on the part of young women; they are discouraged from identifying themselves as sexualized beings with wills and desires of their own (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994, 2002, 2006).

Why is this so dangerous for girls? Wanda Pillow (2002) argues that women especially have been marked by intersecting issues of power, class, and gender. Collective research suggests that overwhelmingly, adolescent girls report that their experiences with coming to terms with their own sexuality are not pleasant, not positive,
and often include negative views of their own body, its purposes, and its value (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1990, 1995; Tolman, 2003, 2006). Adolescent girls often report looking at their bodies and their sexuality as sources of dilemma (Tolman, 2002). Coming-of-age is not an easy thing for girls and avenues for discussion, perhaps including literary or media stories similar to the girls' own situations would give them one means of negotiating the rocky process of developing their own gendered and sexualized identities (Ward et al, 2006).

Unfortunately there is little research done on positive influences on adolescent female sexuality and body image, perhaps because adolescent female sexuality is still looked upon not as a biological fact, but instead organized discursively as dangerous and taboo (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994). While adults may want to avoid messy conversations about teen bodies, about race, about class, about gender—teens themselves are aware that these issues deeply affect not only their educational experiences, but their life experiences (Pillow, 1997). Acknowledging the importance of the body disrupts traditional patterns of thinking and false dichotomies as girls attempt to negotiate their evolving gendered identity.

Schools, families, communities, and social service organizations need to disrupt or challenge the dominant discourse of what it is to be female. Traditional views of femininity often do not empower girls to be active agents within their own lives, especially their sexual lives. In one study (Oliver & Lalik, 2001) where girls were involved in discussion groups around issues of the body and body image, girls revealed how they viewed their bodies as a form of collateral or currency that they saw as socially valuable—not just in terms of sexuality, but in terms of being nice, well-liked, and
popular. Beauty was viewed as particularly powerful currency, with both males and fellow female students (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Although the girls in this study described feelings of socially situated power, the locus of this power was almost entirely upon the outward appearance of the body rather than an accomplishment of the body such as athletic ability (Oliver & Lalik, 2001).

Girls’ Literacy Studies

Hubbard et al’s “We Want to be Known”: Learning from Adolescent Girls (1998) chronicles various teachers work with adolescent girls. Issues of gender, power, control and language are discussed. In one piece, teacher Maureen Barbieri describes how inspired by Carol Gilligan’s arguments that adolescent girls need to develop strong, mentoring relationships with their female teachers, she started an after school group for girls. The group involved reading and writing of books, but also provided spaces for what the girls called “fun”—reading, writing, field trips, and primarily a space to talk about their lives and their experiences. Gilligan (1993) describes how adolescent girls often begin the practice of “silencing,” as they seek ideal relationships and feel pressures of social expectations. Girls then need spaces where their voices can be heard, where they can find the relationships they need. Various ethnographies studying girls’ literacy practices have illustrated how examining such practices can offer valuable insights into the ways adolescent girls construct their own identities, but also can offer spaces where girls can allow their voices to be heard (Barbieri, 1995; Blackford, 2004; Broughton & Fairbanks, 426; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997; Harper, 1998, 2000; Shultz, 1996).
Three main studies of girls' literacies informed my research into girls' literacy studies and my desire to explore a “girls only” space for high school readers to discuss literature they self-selected as containing themes that were personally meaningful. First, Margaret Finders’ work, *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High Classrooms* (1997) examines early adolescents who are entering the junior high years. Her research explores the literacy practices of these girls both in and outside of schools via observations and interviews with the girls, their teachers, and their parents. Finders’ work also addresses class and social issues between girls she dubs “the tough cookies” and the more socially elite “social queens.” Finders discusses girls’ in and out-of-school literacies, with particularly interesting discussions of what she describes as the “literate underlife,” which consists of girl’s private literacy practices of passing notes, reading teen magazines, and even writing on bathroom stalls. Finders delves into social class issues and how they affect girls. The “social queens” are popular girls from affluent homes. They actively resist schooled reading as interfering with their status as “popular” and “cool.” The “tough cookies” on the other hand are from working class families and while they may not always enjoy school-sanctioned forms of literacy, they view school as a means of getting ahead socially and economically and thus largely conform to school literacy practices. One of the most interesting aspects of Finders’ study is her reflection and realizations that language arts pedagogy that she found to be liberating and solid as a teacher suddenly seemed less so when she more closely examined girls’ resistance to many reader-response based practices such as writer’s workshop.

Cherland’s (1994) work, *Private Practices: Girls Reading Fiction and Constructing Identity*, also focuses on middle school aged girls and studies the uses and
effects of girls’ fictional reading on their lives and their identities. After following girls’ in their language arts classes and their personal and school readings she describes the need for teachers to provide ways for girls’ to develop a more critical consciousness about what they read. Cherland, like Finders, also includes research into family and parental influences of reading and literate habits. Cherland’s study examines girls’ literature responses in literature based discussions, describing how boys’ influences in the classroom often hamper and hinder girls’ ability to respond fully, she describes how girls use these spaces to “do gender.” She concludes that schools and literacy teachers in particular need to more actively promote policies and pedagogy that encourage young women to develop a critical consciousness about social discourses surrounding gender and femininity.

In her book, *Sounds from the Heart*, Maureen Barbieri (1995) writes clearly from the voice and experiences of a language arts teacher; her study has a strong focus on the writing habits of her students, although their reading practices are also chronicled. Again, this is a study of middle school aged girls, but these students attend an all-girls, private school. Barbieri’s work with her female students involves teaching for critical consciousness, critical literacy, and critical analysis. Barbieri clearly states her own pedagogical and theoretical frames for teaching, as she sees literacy practices as potentially empowering and significant means for confronting social discourses that challenge adolescent girls. Barbieri’s writing rings with the voice of a reflective teacher practitioner, as she reflects upon her own desires and struggles to provide quality, empowering literacy experiences to the girls in her classroom. Even though the participants in this study attended an all-girls school separate from the influences and
challenges often associated with mixed-gender classrooms, the girls in her study still reflected a silencing of their own voices and opinions with their desires to be “nice” and to maintain friendships. Perhaps the most interesting and powerful piece of Barbieri’s study that influenced my thinking about Book Group was her experiences when she left the all-girls school to teach in a co-ed environment again. Suddenly she felt she had lost control of her classroom and was haunted by her observations that boys’ demands and presence seemed to silence and drown out the voices of her female students. At the end of her research, she describes an experiment where she and another teacher share students to create single-sex spaces within the public school classroom, which she describes as successful for both male and female students.

While these studies all offer illuminating glimpses into the literacy practices of young adolescent girls, many areas for research still exist. Most of the work with girls’ studies of literacy practices centers around middle school students rather than high school students. Also, the majority of the girls studied are from white, middle class and upper middle class backgrounds. While a few studies of working class and minority girls’ literacy practice exist (Shultz, 1996; Hartman, 2001), more are needed. Drawing upon these works, this research continues this examination of girls’ literacy practices, but with high school students, many of whom come from racially diverse and/or socioeconomically challenged backgrounds.

Body Image and Issues of the Body

This study draws largely upon my feminist and phenomenological research upon the body and body identity and where available, upon what these theories have to say.
specifically about the experiences of adolescent girls. These theories diverge from more traditional and psychoanalytic notions of the body advanced by earlier writers such as Freud and Erikson. Feminist research has illustrated the power that issues of the body have in forming both adolescent females' public (schooled) and private identities; public sentiments about what is acceptable with regards to the body strongly shape adolescent females' sense of self worth and self image (hooks, 1990; Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 2006). Recent research suggests that discussion based forums can open up spaces for girls to critically examine popular notions of the body as well as their own experiences and thoughts on their own bodies (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001). For this study, attention to young adult literature and its treatment of body issues such as teen pregnancy, self mutilation, adolescent sexuality, body image, eating disorders, etc. will help facilitate an examination of ways in which authentic, critical discussion of literature can foster new ways of examining issues of adolescent identity and the body.

Current scholarship on issues of the body generally falls into two different ways of naming or framing the body. There is the issue of the discursive body, the body as a text, upon which issues of culture and power are inscribed or written. There is also the notion of the material or corporeal body, the actual physical body that sits before us in the classroom (Grosz, 1994). Attention must be paid to both notions of the body. Focusing primarily on the discursive body allows us to avoid the corporeal body, the fleshly body that frightens educational systems but adolescent are often fascinated by and obsessed with.

'The body' is not a thing available for unproblematic reference, but is shaped by, and made available through, discourse...the only body we can
ever talk about, the only body we can think, is shaped and indeed disciplined by the language in which it is known and recognized (Cryle, 2000, p. 18).

Examining bodies is important for critical work in education, as research and writing on the body discusses the embodiment of power, including work by Foucault (1975, 1980) but also by recent writings of Bordo (1993), Butler (1993), Grosz (1994), hooks (1994) and others. These recent writings on the body suggest that knowledge and power are not held as is usually thought by individual minds and individual bodies, but are rather “generated in embodied and bodily relations between people” (Moje, 2000). Bordo describes how notions of the body are continually shaping issues of power, especially for women. “For women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered on the body...culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (Bordo, 1993, p. 17).

Much research has been done on issues of the body and body image as they relate to adolescent girls. Younger and younger girls are becoming concerned and almost obsessed with their body image, and overwhelmingly, adolescent girls' sense of identity and development is tied up in issues of the body (Bordo, 1993; Brown & Gilligan, 1994; Oliver & Lalik, 2001; Pipher, 1994; Rosenbaum, 1993; Tolman, 1994, 2003, 2006). Teachers and parents often look on adolescent girls’ obsessions with fashion, makeup, and grooming with frustration. What high school teacher hasn’t had to tell a teenaged girl to put her makeup away? Rather than critiquing these practices, some writing on adolescent identity has normalized these practices, as Oliver & Lalik (2001) describe, perpetuating these images of adolescent girls as naturally obsessed with issues of
appearance and the body, creating a hegemonic view of adolescent femininity, which is damaging to girls. "Normalizing girls’ concerns with their bodies has allowed educators and others to ignore or dismiss destructive behaviors, even as these behaviors may lead to diminished life chances for girls and women" (Oliver & Lalik, 2001, p. 304).

Drew Leder’s postmodern work on the body discusses how the female body is commonly positioned as “Other”; he describes this as “dys-appearance” where the female body is a place of vulnerability, not just to biological, but to sociopolitical forces (1990). Similarly, Sandra Bartky’s (2000) work discusses the ramifications of sociopolitical forces on adolescent girls. She describes these issues of alienation that females and adolescent females in particular must navigate as they attempt to understand and mitigate the highly pressured messages and social discourses surrounding femininity and female beauty, what Bartky describes as the “fashion-beauty complex” (p. 324). Adolescent girls are given unrealistic expectations of their own physical bodies that they feel extreme pressure to live up to, which can cause a splitting and alienation as,

Women in Western societies live out an estrangement from the body; on the one hand, we are the body and are scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand we must exist perpetually at a distance from our physical selves, fixed in a permanent posture of disapproval (Bartky, 2000, p. 324).

The Absence of the Body in Schooling

Specific research about the adolescent body in the classroom is limited and very little is written phenomenologically about adolescents’ experiences of the interaction of the body and schooling; we understand very little about what adolescents say their
experiences are. The body itself is largely absent from curriculum or discussion in secondary schools, the bare minimum of attention is paid in physical education and health courses (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Even when bodies are discussed in the disciplines of physical education or health sciences, there is little emphasis on encouraging students to think critically about issues of the body; rather the body is presented as an object that can be controlled or manipulated through exercise or nutrition (Pronger, 1993; Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Students’ actual feelings, questions, concerns, and experiences of the body are largely ignored in secondary curriculum and when the body is discussed, it is largely from an adult or teacher’s perspective (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Even studies done within the fields of developmental psychology and sociology, to examine issues of adolescent female development and body identity rarely offer girls opportunities to discuss their own experiences in any open sort of way. Rosenbaum’s (1993) work with adolescent girls was one of the first looks at qualitative, phenomenological stances on girls’ experiences. More work in this area is highly needed, as much of the past work in body image has been quantitative and doesn’t allow for the rich detail of individual girls’ experiences. Rosenbaum’s findings described how girls’ experiences of their adolescent bodies were continually being interpreted and revised as were their own senses of body image and identity. The girls often described how other’s reaction to their body heavily influenced their own sense of self and the formation of their identity.

“Curriculum that focuses in a positive way upon issues of sexual identity, sexuality, and sexism is still rare” (Smith, 1999, p. 114). Schools and literature classrooms are places where the world of texts and the world of adolescent identity intersect. Recent research in feminist and queer theories, in addition to socio-cultural
theory has challenged the notion of the body and mind as entities that serve merely to produce cognitive and biological processes, but instead bodies are sites of socially inscribed culture and power (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1990; Grosz, 1994; McWilliam, 2000; Pillow, 2002). Literature classrooms must examine the ways bodies are dealt with not only in texts that are read, but also the ways real flesh and blood adolescent bodies are addressed not only as interpreters and readers of literature, but as embodied examples of culture, power, and gender. Adolescents are specifically important subjects for discussions of the body as they are often defined by their bodily experiences of puberty and development (Lesko, 2001). This topic of the adolescent female body is extremely important as research suggests that adolescent girls especially are affected by issues of the body (Bordo, 1993).

Schools then have powerful opportunities to open spaces for girls to critically examine popular notions of the body as well as their own experiences and thoughts on their own bodies (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Schools are sites where teen bodies are “represented, reproduced, regulated, and restrained” (Pillow, 2003, p. 151). Girls need opportunities to speak, to read, to write, to become critically active in ways that will allow them to deconstruct and address the systems of power inherent in schooling and other formalized discourses shaping gender, class, sex, etc. (Freire, 1970).

Although some work has been done in the area of physical education (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001), the language arts classroom also seems a natural space for girls to have opportunities to read and write and discuss issues of body image and identity. Taking a critical stance on issues such as body image and identity would be an opportunity for students to read and write the world (Freire, 1970) as they examine
systems of oppression that limit girls' own views of themselves. Girls' own stories, combined with literary and media readings of issues of the body could provide powerful spaces for girls to engage in critical practices of reflection. “Social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations. These stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57).

Wanda Pillow, whose research into the policies and pedagogy surrounding teen girls, and most specifically, teen mothers, uses what she calls a feminist genealogy to examine how policies and procedures shape adolescent girls’ schooling experiences (1997, 2002, 2003). Although educational policy is all about bodies—“controlling, regulating, shaping, and reproducing bodies” (Pillow, 2003, p. 146), issues of the body in the classroom often are still seen as taboo. Educational systems and policy makers have been criticized for seeing students, classrooms, and schools as neutral spaces, and ignoring the larger historical, social, cultural issues that are embedded within classrooms and the very bodies that inhabit them (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Pillow 2002, 2003). Classrooms are anything but neutral spaces; they are instead constant intersections of culture, gender, race, and class.

Pillow’s work draws from the writings and theories of Foucault, analyzed through what she calls “specific attention to the discursively structured, raced, gendered, and sexed body” (Pillow, 2003, p. 146). This methodology for analyzing the discursive situation of bodies she describes as a feminist genealogy (Pillow, 1997). Feminist genealogy is concerned with ways of analyzing and reinterpreting power structures and issues of gender, class, and sexuality that govern the female body. Pillow’s work with
feminist genealogy builds upon Foucault's work on the body, "refiguring conceptualizations of bodies, power and knowledge" (Pillow, 2003, p. 146). She describes how educational policies, designed to supposedly enhance education, are often totally out of line with the lived experiences of teen bodies. Ignoring the needs of the teen body is not just the part of policymakers or administrators, teachers too often ignore the physical realities of the teen body, especially for example, when that body is pregnant and a visible reminder of the teen's sexuality and sexual experience (Pillow, 1997). Feminist genealogy seeks to answer and examine questions about the way in which adolescent female bodies are "represented, regulated, and restrained" and what the effects of such bodily issues are (Pillow, 2003, p. 151).

Conclusion

Past research that combines qualitative methodologies with socio-cultural theories of reading and literacy has demonstrated that literacy practices can simultaneously be important sites of both reproduction and resistance for girls (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1997; Harper, 2000; Hartman, 2001). In addition, Moje (2002) argues that despite the vast amounts of research on young people and literacy and adolescent literacy in general, there is still a lack of research on the spaces and the ways in which adolescents define and describe their own literacy experiences. This study seeks to continue important research into the literacy practices of girls, including a gap in the literature regarding high school girls. Particularly, this study seeks to examine the ways in which high school girls discuss and examine literature that contains issues of the body, a topic still almost invisible within school curriculum and language arts classrooms.
CHAPTER 3  

METHODOLOGY  

The methodology for this study draws upon my beliefs as a feminist and a reflective teacher practitioner, as well as influences derived from literary theory including reader response, socio-cultural theory, and critical literacy. The conception of this study is the reflection of years of practice and experience as a woman, a reader, a language arts teacher, and a literacy researcher. My identities then have helped consciously shape the choices made for this study—my beliefs and experiences as a feminist, literacy teacher have led me to believe girls need spaces outside of the traditional school day to explore their own identities as readers and as girls shaped by social discourses about what it is to be a girl in our society. These same identities have shaped my concern and consternation over the way adolescent girls' bodies are portrayed and positioned in popular media, but also how they are all but ignored and silenced within public schools. My desire to allow girls' voices and experiences to be heard and acknowledged has led me to this research, a qualitative case study analysis of girls' experiences and narrated identities within their discussion of literature and issues of the body.

Research Questions  

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of high school girls in literature based discussion groups that delve into issues of the body via young adult
literature. This study examines the following questions:

1) What are the perceptions of adolescent females about the experience of participating in literature based discussions of young adult literature featuring issues tied to the body?

2) How do literature based discussion groups reveal adolescent girls’ understandings of their own complex identities as gendered readers?

3) Can literature based discussions provide spaces for adolescent girls to identify and critique socially situated discourses regarding issues associated with femininity and the body?

Implementation

This project involved both participant observation and was informed by work in practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001), as I observed and engaged in the process of facilitating a literature discussion group surrounding topics of the body with adolescent girls. As a participant observer, I needed to “look at the same things again and again until they themselves begin to speak” (Glesne, 1999, p. 60). At the same time that I was conscientiously seeking to conduct detailed observations of the literature circle discussions and the experiences the girls described, I consistently acknowledged the challenge of both “teaching” and researching simultaneously. Thus, I found myself continually cognizant of my own subjectivities and intersubjectivities that developed throughout the course of the study (Glesne, 1999).

Yet, truly these own subjectivities and prior experiences are the foundations of this study. My research questions and the study design were largely drawn from my own work as a teacher of adolescent girls; the design of this study was framed largely by prior
experiences I had as a language arts teacher at the high school that became the research site. This research then is primarily an attempt to create a way of knowing and reflecting of, for, and through my own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Literature circles and literary discussions were an important element in my classroom instruction. Reader response strongly informed and guided my classroom practice for over a decade; in the later years of teaching, my expanding knowledge and interest in socio-cultural views of literacy and critical literacy helped reshape and redefine the ways in which I constructed and chose literature pieces, experiences and pedagogy within my classroom. Thus this study will be an examination of practices, pedagogy, and methods that shaped my own classroom instruction as a reflective practitioner who was deeply concerned with the literacy experiences of adolescents.

This study integrated data analysis methods that seek to honor and explore participants’ own voices and experiences. This was a case study of the Book Group as a whole, yet the individual voices of the readers who made up Book Group are explored and examined through individual profiles as well as detailed examples from Book Group transcripts and interviews. Data analysis also included the qualitative, interpretive method of The Listening Guide (Brown et al, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al, 1995) which places great emphasis on the examination, analysis, and depiction of participants’ voices and experiences, focusing on a “voice centered” approach to data analysis and description. This research then was designed to honor and feature the voices of adolescent girls, to explore what their experiences, their thoughts, their voices can tell us about adolescent female identity, adolescent literacy, and the lives of adolescent girls in our classrooms today.
Ideally, in my mind I conducted this research for fellow literacy practitioners; to increase the existing body of research on adolescent girls’ literacy experiences and identities, as well as to confront important issues of girls’ embodied senses of self which I saw neglected and ignored in my tenure as a public school teacher. It is my hope that through my work in community and collaboration with these adolescent girls that new insights about the social discourses that shape adolescent girls’ sense of reading and body identity will be revealed.

Site of Research: The School

This study took place in a large, urban high school in a major metropolitan city in the Southwest. The school’s demographics include a large percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch, as well as a small segment of students who would be considered affluent. The school is richly diverse in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, country of origin, etc. It has responded to its large ELL population by promoting what is called a “Newcomer Academy” that helps integrate new, non-English speaking students into the regular district curriculum. This is one of the newer high schools in the city and was in its third year of operation. In many ways, the school is still building its own sense of identity within the community and amongst the staff and students.

This site was chosen for several reasons. One consideration is the rich diversity of the students. Another reason is that the school has actively promoted after school programming and provides a “late bus” that all students can ride for free. In addition, I am a former teacher at this school and the scenarios I describe in my introduction occurred at this particular school; this is the school and these are the students that initially
inspired my desire to design this study. My former employment at this school gave me connections with staff and administration to help facilitate the use of the school facilities as well as helping promote my trustworthiness; these are teachers and principals who know my work and teaching, which perhaps made them more willing to offer me the opportunity to work with students from their high school. In addition, I had a large number of former students at this school who knew me and who had formed relationships with me. I believe this aided in my ability to gain participants for the study, as the majority of the participants ended up being either former students of mine or girls who were close friends with former students of mine. As the study required participation to be voluntary, working in a site where some girls already knew me and those who didn’t might know “of” me seemed to help in interesting girls in participating in the study. Several of the study participants remarked in their exit interviews that they joined the book group or were initially interested in joining because they knew me, trusted me, and/or had discussed literature with me in the past.

Site of Research: “The Book Group”

After obtaining IRB approval through both the university and the school district in which I would be working, I made arrangements with the principal of the high school site to do short “informational talks” about the book group project with language arts classes at the school. As all students at the high school are required to take a language arts course each year, this helped insure that I would be able to speak to as many students in the school as possible. During each language arts class, I spent approximately five to ten minutes explaining the book group project; that it was a voluntary, after school activity
open to all female students at the high school. I informed students that the literature selections for the book group would be young adult literature that dealt with issues common to high school girls, particularly issues tied to the body. I also let students know that they would self-select the books that we read. I answered questions students had about the book group and left informational flyers with each teacher, as well as forms for interested students to fill out so that I could contact them about future meetings of the book group. From this initial contact with students, I received a total of 71 informational sheets back from girls who thought they might be interested in the book group.

All girls who returned interest sheets were invited to attend an after school meeting the following week to find out more information about the book group. During this informational meeting I also went over the necessary consent forms, including both parental permission forms and student assent forms to participate in the project. This also included assent forms to be audio and video taped for the project. Questions about the study were invited and answered and we determined a date for our next meeting, deciding to meet weekly on Thursdays after school. Eighteen girls attended the informational meeting and received parental permission forms and student assent forms.

The first Book Group meeting took place the week following the informational meeting. Ten girls attended the initial meeting; nine of these girls became the permanent members of Book Group for the duration of the study. (One girl attended the initial group meeting and did not return, although she did email me to say that she had been very interested in the group, but couldn’t join due to a conflict with practices for orchestra.) Several other girls who had attended the informational meeting had also
emailed me or stopped by the classroom where we were holding Book Group to say they couldn't join because of issues with other clubs, work, or school commitments.

At this initial meeting, we chose the books we would read together over the coming weeks. I had initially selected a list of 12 books that in some way tied into issues of the body—for example weight issues, physical abuse, date rape, self mutilation, teen pregnancy, addiction, etc. I book talked about each of these books with the girls and brought in copies of the books for the girls to look at as well. From these 12 books, the girls voted on and selected five books to read for the Book Group. The titles selected by the girls were: Cut by Patricia McCormick, Dreamland, by Sarah Dessen, Sold by Patricia McCormick, Life in the Fat Lane by Cherie Bennett, and The First Part Last by Angela Johnson. (An annotated list of the 12 novels offered to the girls is included in the Appendix A.)

Participants and Selection

Original selection criteria for the study, which was discussed with potential participants in individual language arts classrooms was:

1. Participants must be students at the selected high school.
2. Participants must be female.
3. Participants will be from a variety of cultural, ethnic, class, religious, etc. backgrounds as possible or available.
4. Participants must voluntarily join the literature discussion group.

This study was a case study of the book group participants as a whole, including all nine girls who participated in the study as well as myself, a participant observer and researcher. A case study model was chosen to examine the bounded unit of the Book
Group. In addition, as this study is about the experiences of individual girls, short profiles of each of the participants were created in Chapter Four.

Because the sample size of participants is small and because random sampling was not done, it is not meant to be a representative group of girls from this particular high school. However, generalizability was not the goal of this study; instead, I have sought to intensely concentrate on the detailed experiences of a certain small group of girls in a certain space and time—our Book Group. This small scope was necessary to fully capture each girls' experiences and narrated identity, as well as to devote the amount of time and attention to growing a safe, trusting space for participants to engage in literature discussions.

Participants were made fully aware that this was a research project; participant assent forms were provided to all girls involved in the project, to be signed by both themselves and a parent. Girls were informed of the nature of the study, the research questions involved, and the data collection protocols that were involved in the study—including video and audio taping of their discussions and interviews, as well as my own note taking, field notes, and interviewing protocols. An informational meeting after school provided girls with an opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the study as well as to receive necessary information. Human subject protocols were also submitted through UNLV and the Clark County School District for the duration of the study.

Table I includes biographical information for the nine girls who participated in the after-school book group. Names listed are pseudonyms.
Table 1: Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Former Student?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiree</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants except one were either freshmen or sophomores at the high school. Of the nine girls who participated for the duration of the study, the majority (five of the nine), were former students of mine; all former students had been students in sections of English I honors I had taught during either the 2004-2005 or 2005-2006 school years. In fact, all participants in the study were currently enrolled in honors level language arts courses at the school. Although the study was open to all students in the school, the group of girls who self-selected to join the book group was comprised of all honors level language arts students. Four of the girls were members of the AVID program at the school, which places students who might not normally be in honors courses in higher level classes to push them towards a college track. The AVID program
traditionally targets students who because of socio-economic, racial, or family background are statistically less likely to go on to college after high school.

Two of the girls who had not been former students of mine, Melissa and Felicity, said that they had been encouraged by their AVID teacher to join the book group. The AVID teacher and I were close friends and the girls said she had told them I was “cool” and “fun.” Another girl who I had not had as a former student, Maria, came to book group each week with her best friend, Carolina, who was one of my former students. According to their final interviews for the project, Maria only came initially because she had the company of Carolina who had also said that I was “cool” and could be trusted. Only one girl joined book group who had no former tie to my classroom teaching at the school nor through a recommendation of a teacher or student at the school and that was Desiree, who acknowledged that she was very “outgoing” and “loved to talk” (Desiree, exit interview, 5/10/07).

Three of the nine participants in the study (Jamie, Carolina, and Maria) were Hispanic and of Mexican heritage. These three girls were also bilingual, and spoke both fluent Spanish and English. Two of the three girls, Jamie and Carolina, also wrote and read fluently in Spanish as well. All three of the girls were born in the United States, but had extended families still living in Mexico. One participant, Desiree, was African American. The rest of the participants in the study were White. None of the participants other than the Hispanic girls spoke a second language.

The majority of the students attending the participants’ high school are from lower middle class to middle class families; although no data was gathered regarding study participants’ or their families’ economic status, most of the girls seemed to come
from lower middle class to middle class homes. Their parents’ jobs included occupations such as teachers, a chef, a pastor, and a travel agent. Several of the girls came from single parent households, and two of the girls (Desiree and Carolina) mentioned that their fathers did not contribute financially to the family at all.

Finally, as this is a study of girls’ readings and narratives regarding issues of the body and femininity, considering sexual identity is important as well. Although none of the girls ever concretely addressed their sexual orientation during the duration of the study, girls frequently described relationships and discourses that strongly tied to heterosexual identity. On the few occasions when I introduced topics that acknowledged that not all relationships and romantic scripts were tied to heterosexual identity and desire, the girls failed to acknowledge, much less actively address or embrace such topics. This is discussed further in Chapter Five’s data analysis.

In Chapter Four, I include more detailed descriptions of each of the participants gathered from their initial questionnaires for the study, the identity artifacts they created as an introduction to the group, their own words and thoughts expressed in book group and their exit interviews with myself at the end of the study.

Risks and Benefits

Potential risks to subjects were minimized by coding participants’ names and identities as to conceal and protect their anonymity. Initially, participants did have questions regarding their privacy and who would watch and listen to the audio and video taped recordings of their discussions; during the initial informational meeting and during subsequent meetings, participants were assured that only I would be watching and
listening to their taped discussions. In addition, group boundaries were established early on in the Book Group’s forming that the Book Group needed to be a space where information shared in Book Group stayed in Book Group. Girls seemed to deeply respect this notion of safe space and many commented in their exit interviews how they had been able to share deeply in their weekly conversations as they trusted both me and their fellow group members to not disclose information shared in Book Group discussions.

The nature of the study, the research questions, and the study protocols were all discussed with participants prior to the Book Group’s first formal meeting and informational letters were sent to parents as well. Both adolescent participants and their parents signed informed consent forms. Every effort was made to promote an atmosphere of trust, acceptance, and confidentiality within the literature discussion groups; as participation in the study was voluntary, potential participants were able to decide if they wished to participate in the book group discussions after they had received full information about what the project entailed.

My vision of the potential benefits of this research is deeply grounded within my theoretical framework and beliefs. As I view literacy practices as socially situated, this research seeks to describe the narrated experiences of adolescent girls’ discussions of literature and other “texts” that address issues of the body. These issues of the body are critical for adolescent girls, as witnessed by recent research into adolescent female body identity and image. Addressing the issue of adolescent female bodies has been described as “dangerous” by some (Pillow, 2003) and “scary” (Britzman, 1991) by others. Indeed, issues related to the adolescent female body and adolescent sexuality in general have
been labeled as recently as the 1990s, as “culturally unintelligible” for modern schools (Butler, 1993, p. 42). The potential benefits of this research then is a continued, critical attempt to de-silence these critical issues of adolescent females’ experiences with their own bodies and body image and the ways in which social discourses in literature and other texts shape their reactions to and acceptance or resistance of dominant notions of what it is to be female. In addition, my preliminary data collection in this study, which involved a written questionnaire where I asked the girls in Book Group to write down some of the issues that they thought most concerned adolescent girls overall and themselves personally, the girls unanimously cited examples such as “body image,” “weight, weight, weight,” “appearance,” “weight problems,” “body issues,” “pregnancy,” “food issues,” “your looks,” etc. Clearly this was an issue that was both topical and important to them as well, prior to the study.

I too believe, as Glesne does “that inquiry-based practice, accompanied with critical reflection, can contribute to making society more humane and equitable” (1999, p. xi). Influenced and inspired by feminist thought and research, I see this research as social action, as political, much as I always saw my own teaching. As Addison and McGee argue, “…there are two basis tenets of feminist empirical research: (1) the explicit starting point of feminist empirical research is one’s political commitments, and (2) the goal of feminist empirical research is social and individual change” (1999, p. 3). In addition, feminist research is concerned with “the variety of real life stories women provide about themselves” (Lugones & Spelman, 1990, p. 21). This research seeks to allow adolescent girls opportunities to share their experiences, their reading, their
narrated sense of identity, and their own sense of themselves as adolescent bodies, shaped and influenced by social discourses surrounding gender and the body.

Data Collection

Data collection for this project took place over a 12 week period of time, during the spring semester of the girls' high school. This 12 week period included participant recruitment, informational meetings and permissions, as well as weekly literature circle discussions we inevitably termed “Book Group” as well as other related activities such as pre and post interviews and questionnaires, identity response activities, and other forms of group discussion and interaction. See Table 2 for a timeline of data collection and procedures.

Table 2: Data Sources and Timeframes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data Source</th>
<th>Timeframe for Collection/Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Questionnaire</td>
<td>First Book Group meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Artifacts</td>
<td>First and second Book Group meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcripts of audio-taped Book Group discussion</td>
<td>Ongoing throughout study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videotapings of Book Group</td>
<td>Ongoing throughout study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online “blog” postings</td>
<td>Ongoing throughout study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual exit interviews</td>
<td>End of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher field notes</td>
<td>Ongoing throughout study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical memos</td>
<td>Ongoing throughout study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection included a pre-study questionnaire that identified girls’ reading habits, preferences, and interests; the creation and sharing of “identity artifacts” that included information on individual girl’s perceptions of their identities (Leander, 2002); audio and video taped transcriptions of Book Group literature discussions; transcripts from online discussions or “blogs”; researcher field notes; and analytical or research memos (Jessop & Penney, 1999; Glaser, 1978). Multiple forms and sources of data were gathered to provide as much detailed description as possible as well as to facilitate triangulation of data sources in “the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each” (Berg, 1995, p. 5).

Initial Reading Questionnaires

Initially, participants were asked to complete a 13 question questionnaire that asked primarily open-ended questions about the girls’ prior experiences with reading and literature discussions in and out of school, girls’ own sense of their reading identities, girls’ interests and concerns, and girls’ experiences or thoughts on how adolescent female bodies are represented in literature, film, and other “texts.” These initial questionnaires were used to help inform me about girls’ interests and provided initial information to inform my selection of possible young adult novels for group reading and discussion; the twelve novels I book talked with the girls all related to interests and concerns the participants listed as common to adolescent girls. In addition, these questionnaires were used to help form follow up questions for informal questioning during book group meetings as well as helped inform the construction of questions for the individual final interviews. The information from the reading questionnaires also contributed to the
construction of the individual profiles of the girls in Chapter Four. (See Appendix B for a copy of this initial questionnaire.)

Identity Artifacts

During our first meeting as a group, I shared with the girls a body biography I had created about myself as a way of introducing myself to the group. Body biographies include symbolic representations of identity, and are often constructed as a literary response strategy in classrooms, as a means of analyzing and connecting to literary characters. As this was a book group targeted towards issues of the body of interest to adolescent girls, body biographies seemed an interesting and powerful way for me to share information about my own sense of identity with the members of the group. I then invited the girls to also construct a similar, visual representation of themselves to share with the group members as a means of introduction and getting to know one another. The sharing of these identity artifacts with group members was also audio taped for later transcription and analysis. These identity artifacts not only helped create a sense of community for group members as we got to know one another, they were also a valuable data source for analysis, as sense of identity is often revealed through the narrated tales individuals use to describe themselves, their actions, and their ways of dealing with others (Bruner, 1990). In addition, creating visual representations and responses helps encourage individuals to think critically and symbolically about their own ways of knowing and making meaning (Harste et al, 1984; Whitin, 1996; Whitin, 2002).

Participants each chose their own method for designing their Identity Artifact. A few girls designed body biographies while many others created their own unique drawings.
and designs to as ways of representing and introducing themselves. A sample body biography created by one of the participants is included in Appendix C.

*Book Group Discussions*

The participants who were my former students had participated in literature circle discussions as a part of the class work for my language arts course. As my conception and initial design for the Book Group discussions was based upon my experiences with classroom literature circle discussions, these girls had some prior experiences with open-ended, student led literature based discussion. One participant, Bethany, had also participated in a small book group through her church, where they read inspirational and religiously tied texts. Most of the other participants stated that they had no prior experiences with peer-led discussions about literature. Appropriate scaffolding and modeling of how one might engage in discussion and reflective practices in a literature circle discussion was discussed during the initial “getting to know you” meeting of the Book Group; I asked girls who were my former students to describe how a literature circle discussion worked or functioned. They offered comments such as “there are no wrong answers,” “you come up with the questions and things you want to talk about yourself,” and “the teacher doesn’t lead it, the students do.” I emphasized to the girls that I wanted them to feel ownership and freedom in their discussions, that my role was to be a part of the Book Group as a member and as a researcher, but not as a teacher or authority figure. I felt these initial discussions around what to expect from Book Group were especially important as research has shown that appropriate scaffolding is important for successful outcomes in literature based discussions (Evans 2001, 2002).
Tying in to my emphasis on the girls’ ownership of the Book Group experience, I wanted to give them as many choices as possible concerning what they read, how they read, and how much they read each week. Reading research on adolescent preferences indicates that adolescent readers want choices in what they read (Alvermann et al., 1999; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2001). To foster participant choice, I initially selected a list of 12 books to “book talk” to the girls that tied in to the issues they listed as being important to themselves and to teenage girls overall on their initial questionnaires. An annotated list of these 12 books is included in Appendix A. I “book talked” each of these selections to the girls at the beginning of the study, allowing participant choice on reading selections, which is important in a reader-centered approach. From these 12 books, the girls voted on and chose five books to read together. A list of the books chosen and the major topics described is included in Table Three.

Table 3: Books Chosen for Book Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Main Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cut</td>
<td>Patricia McCormick</td>
<td>Self-Mutilation/Cutting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreamland</td>
<td>Sarah Dessen</td>
<td>Abusive Relationships/Physical Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold</td>
<td>Patricia McCormick</td>
<td>Teenage Prostitution/India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in the Fat Lane</td>
<td>Cherie Bennett</td>
<td>Weight Issues/Body Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Part Last</td>
<td>Angela Johnson</td>
<td>Teenage Pregnancy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Book Group participants and I met seven times for actual Book Group discussions, meeting once a week on Thursday afternoons after school. Generally, our meetings lasted about two hours, with the first half hour being used for an informal social time; I provided snacks each week and we spent this time eating, chatting, and quite often, laughing. Although there was no formal rule against discussing the books during this informal social time, for the most part the girls and I saved our discussion of the books we read for the second part of our meetings. After our initial half hour of snacking and chatting, we generally transitioned into our more formal Book Group discussions. The transition for this time was marked by our moving the desks into a small circle where we could all view one another's faces easily and by my turning on the tape recorder and video camera to record the discussions. The girls had asked early on to not have themselves taped while they were eating and chatting, although I did ask them if I could use topics that came up during this time for my field notes. I also let the girls know that if there was ever anything that came up during this initial time that they didn't want me to record in my field notes they could let me know. None of the participants ever asked me to not include anything disclosed during this time.

Weekly Book Group discussions generally lasted approximately ninety minutes. Although we never established a formal ending time for our meetings, most often the conversations seemed to naturally dwindle down at about the hour and a half mark. These Book Group discussions were both audio and video taped for future transcription. The video tapes were important resources for later analysis and for adding details to my initial transcriptions of the audio tapes as well as my field notes. The video tapes also often helped me distinguish speakers when the audio tapes were hard to decipher.
The Books We Read

We read five books together in Book Group. Each of the titles is listed below with a short plot synopsis. All of the titles were selected by the girls from a list of books I shared with them during our first official Book Group meeting.

• *Cut*, by Patricia McCormick (2000) is the story of Cally, a high school girl who self mutilates or “cuts.” The book opens in a psychiatric facility, where Cally is a patient; she refuses to share with her counselor or with the other girls who are a part of her group therapy about why she cuts. In fact, the reader quickly realizes that Cally isn’t quite sure herself why she cuts. Over the course of the novel, through voiced flashbacks Cally eventually shares with her therapist, the reader learns of the family tensions and troubles Cally has internalized as she struggles to understand why she is harming herself.

• *Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen (2000) is the story of Caitlin, a high school junior who wakes up on her sixteenth birthday to discover that her older sister Cassie has “run away” two weeks before she is due to leave for Yale. In the family chaos that ensues, Caitlin is virtually forgotten by her parents. When Caitlin meets Rogerson, another high school student, she is drawn to his mysterious, quiet demeanor and finds solace in her relationship with him. However, their romance quickly sours as Rogerson demonstrates an abusive side—he physically and emotionally abuses Caitlin. She is torn between what she feels for him and the fear she also hides from her family and friends.

• *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2006) is set in a rural village in Nepal and tells the tale of 13-year-old Lakshmi, from an impoverished family. Written in poignant,
poetic vignettes, *Sold* tells the tale of how Lakshmi’s selfish, gambling stepfather sells her to a woman who trades girls for teenage prostitution in India. Believing she is going to the city to become a maid for a rich family, Lakshmi is horrified and desperate when she learns what her real fate is to become. She is imprisoned and beaten by Mumtaz, the cruel madam at the Indian brothel and spends her days wondering how she will escape in a land where she can neither speak nor read the language.

- *Life in the Fat Lane* by Cherie Bennett (1998) is a story of Lara, a teenaged beauty queen who comes from what she thinks of as a “picture perfect” family. Her life and thoughts revolve around her appearance and popularity, until she contracts a disease that makes her unexpectedly gain weight uncontrollably. Over the course of the novel, Lara goes from 118 pounds to over 200 pounds. Unable to control her weight and her body, Lara seeks desperate measures to deal with her weight gain and what she perceives as her loss of herself.

- *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (2003) is the story of Bobby and Nia, a young couple in love who learn on Bobby’s sixteenth birthday that they are about to become parents. The story is told in a series of alternating flashbacks, as the reader watches Nia and Bobby struggle to cope with her unplanned pregnancy and the subsequent birth of their daughter, Feather.

**Online Blogs**

Another avenue for group discussion and a further data source was an Online “Blog.” I created an online bulletin board using World Crossing software on the Internet. World Crossing was chosen as the platform for the online “blog” for several reasons.
First, I have extensive experience with this program, as I have been posting in an online forum hosted by World Crossing for several years, so I knew I could help participants navigate the program as well as troubleshoot any technical difficulties fairly easily. In addition, this software platform is free to all users and also has provisions available to create a “closed group” by invitation only. This allowed me to create a safe Internet space for the girls to post their thoughts where no one outside of the Book Group participants would have access. I created the blog as an optional, online space for girls to discuss the books they were reading and issues raised within the literature or about other related issues to reading, literature, texts, body image, etc. Although much research into new literacies and adolescent literacy experiences suggests that adolescents are strongly attracted to technology and non-traditional forms of textual reading and writing, the blogs were not heavily used by the girls. Only about half of the participants ever checked into the blog site and even then most girls only posted once or twice to the blog.

We read five books together in Book Group. Four of the five books were discussed in weekly face-to-face Book Group discussions. The final book, *The First Part Last*, was read independently and we had an online Book Group meeting on the blog. However, only about half of the girls checked in for the online Book Group meeting for *The First Part Last*. We decided as a group to attempt an online discussion of our final novel because a scheduling constraint had prevented the majority of the girls from being able to attend one of our final Thursday afternoon meetings. (Three of the girls were on an out-of-state field trip for Art Club and several other girls were absent that day from school due to “Take Your Daughter to Work Day.”) The online discussion didn’t really
develop, although several girls left individual posts about their thoughts regarding *The First Part Last*.

**Individual Exit Interviews**

At the end of the study, girls were interviewed privately about their experiences in the book group. I developed fifteen interview questions that all participants were asked to gain insights into their experiences in the book group overall, their reactions to the literature read, and connections between their own personal sense of self and the literature read. In addition, before interviewing individual girls, I reviewed all of the transcriptions of the weekly Book Group discussions as well as my analytical memos and researcher field notes to develop questions I wanted to ask specifically to particular participants. This was done as a form of further data collection where I saw gaps in the data, but also as a means of member checking and triangulation. These interviews were audio taped and transcribed for further data analysis. A list of overall exit interview questions is included in Appendix C.

**Researcher Field Notes**

Detailed field notes were taken throughout the study to aid in developing "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of the setting, participants, and process of the Book Group discussions. Continual, sustained researcher field notes and analytical memos were vitally important as forms of ongoing data collection, through these sustained, repeated practices I was first able to begin to view underlying structures and issues of the Book Group experience, girls reactions and reading stances, and their own sense of self and identity as tied to the literature we read and the topics discussed (Lewis, 2001; Quantz, 1999). As Quantz (1999) asserts, "[It is] in the smaller, daily rituals, we are likely to find
the real stuff of cultural politics” (In Lewis, 2001, p. 71). These field notes were often just quick jottings during weekly Book Group meetings as I wanted to fully participate in the Book Group discussions and detailed note taking did not lend itself well to being an attentive listener and speaker during literature discussions. However, following the participants’ departure from the weekly meetings, I would stay in the classroom for an additional twenty to thirty minutes to add to my field notes my observations and thoughts from that day’s discussion.

Analytical Memos

Another important source of data and also an early method of data analysis was my creation of analytical memos. As stated above, being a participant-observer and an active member of Book Group did not often provide ample opportunities to take detailed field-notes while the literature discussions occurred. Thus, the use of analytic memos (Jessop & Penny, 1999), was an important data source and a part of the ongoing data analysis of the early stages of the study; these analytical memos were generally created after reviewing and reflecting upon my initial field notes and after reviewing both the audio and video tapes of the weekly literature discussions. Analytical memos are discussed further in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methods were chosen for several reasons, including the fact that rather than testing theory, this study was an attempt to build theory. As my primary research question dealt with the experiences described and lived by adolescent girls while participating in the
Book Group discussions, qualitative research was not only preferential, but essential; as qualitative methodology seeks to examine intensely lived experiences within their original context, which cannot be easily measured through quantitative methods (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the course of the study; from February 2007 through May 2007, the Book Group met weekly over a 12 week period. Following each weekly meeting, I initially listened to and viewed the audio and video tapes, taking notes and journaling my initial thoughts and reactions in the form of field notes and analytical memos to include as much rich, recently experienced detail as possible. Audio and video taped Book Group discussions were then transcribed in an ongoing process throughout the study, as quickly as possible after the weekly discussions in order for events to be fresh in my mind and for the description contained to be as “thick” as possible (Geertz, 1973).

I collected a variety of data sources for this project; Table 4 illustrates the data sources, as well as the corresponding sections of data analysis they were used for. Early on, I realized that I was quickly “drowning in data,” as I spent hours collecting data, transcribing data, and writing analytical memos reflecting upon this early data collection. By the time the Book Group meetings formally ended, I had approximately 150 pages of typed transcription just from Book Group meetings alone. In addition, each participant and I met for a one-on-one exit interview that was audio taped and later transcribed; these added another 40+ pages of transcription to my growing stack of data. Additional data sources for analysis and coding included the participants’ completion of a pre-survey questionnaire, any online postings to the blog, as well as notebooks full of my own
handwritten field notes and analytical memos. These handwritten thoughts often included my own reactions to the research process, doubts or questions I had about my own role in the research, notes on individual girls’ participation in the research, drafts of future questions, initial thoughts on coding and themes, etc. This large amount of data is common in qualitative research, where data generated is often “voluminous” (Patton, 1990). The wide variety of data sources used though was a means of triangulating the data, drawing data from multiple sources, individuals and methods of collection (Creswell, 2002).

Table 4: Research Questions/Chapters & Correlating Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Profiles Of the Book Group</th>
<th>Research Question 1: Experiences</th>
<th>Research Question 2: Identities</th>
<th>Research Question 3: Social Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Survey Questionnaire</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Artifacts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Group Discussions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Blog</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit Interviews</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Field Notes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Memos</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The earliest and initial forms of data analysis then were the researcher field notes, analytical memos and the transcription of data sources including weekly Book Group discussions as well as individual interviews with the participants. Transcribed interviews and Book Group discussions were the first step in developing codes and themes within the data. Several texts on the process of qualitative research emphasize the importance of developing codes as graphical means for displaying domains or themes as a researcher begins to analyze his or her data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Spradley, 1980).

*Book Group Transcript Example:*

Carolina: And I was shocked to by this book. I was shocked that they didn’t, they didn’t pay anything to her family. She thought, you know, that she was getting money for her family. It was kind of shocking that he could do that, that he could do that to her.

Ms. L: Yeah, I mean they get that initial money, right. Which was more money than she’s ever heard of, but to us, not very much. Especially as the price of a person?

Carolina: Yeah.

Bethany: And another shocking thing is that the price that she owes is not what was paid for her.

Melissa: Yeah, because she is sold to the lady in the yellow sari, the yellow dress. And that lady then sells her to the brothel in India, so it’s like she’s making more money. She makes money on the deal too.

Carolina: Oh and the punishments there…it was horrible. Their poor bodies.

Desiree: Yeah.

(Other girls visibly shudder.)

Ms. L: Oh it is, it’s just horrible, isn’t it?

Desiree: I mean, oh it’s just...(shudders)
Thematic Coding

From the data gathered, including transcriptions of interviews, Book Group discussions, online blogs, and discussion of identity artifacts, I used domain analysis to recognize themes or categories present in the data. Domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) involves identifying what Spradley describes as cultural domains, which serve to represent single semantic relationships. For example, a domain might be a way to do something, a part of something, a result of doing something, etc.

Once domains are established, the next step is a further analysis and grouping for taxonomic analysis. This allows the initial domain to be divided further, with similar groupings of topics divided off from the larger topic. This type of analysis allows the researcher to establish common themes and important relationships within each participant's data (Spradley, 1980). The final step in this process of analysis then is a componential analysis, in which the domains and taxonomies of each participant are compared to each other to get a sense of the holistic experience of the case study (Spradley, 1980). This method of data analysis is powerful in allowing both individual and group themes to be examined. Completing domain, taxonomies, and componential analysis on the participants of the case study allowed me to see both commonalities and differences in the experiences and responses they provide during the study.

Analytical Memos

Another important source of data for the project and an early form of data analysis was the creation of written, reflective analytical memos by myself, the researcher. As I was an active member of Book Group discussions, my field notes during the actual Book Group meetings were often not detailed or copious. Although I spent time after each Book Group discussion adding details and anecdotes to my researcher field notes, I felt I
needed an early form of data analysis while experiences in weekly meetings were still fresh in my mind. The creation of analytical memos allowed me to do this. The evening after Book Group meetings, I would listen to the day’s audio tapes of the Book Group discussions, jotting down notes and also reviewing my original field notes. I then used these two data sources to reflect upon issues I saw arising during Book Group discussions, themes or patterns I noticed, questions or concerns I had with the development of the research process, etc. Thus, the use of analytic memos, as a means of reflecting upon my assumptions and experiences as well as participant’s experiences were a highly useful form of early data analysis and contributed greatly to the overall design of the study (Jessop & Penny, 1999). Excerpts from a sample analytical memo I created after our initial Book Group meeting are below:

The girls liked the size of the group and hoped it wouldn’t get bigger. Tammy thought it felt more intimate and personal this way. We’re starting with Cut... because it was something I already had a set of, and it is also a quick read. The girls are very excited to read it... they noticed that they are brand new books and seemed really excited that they will be the first to read these books. (Interesting! How often in schools do kids get to read “new books”? Especially not books chosen by and for them!) Two of the girls had already read the book, but loved it, so said they were fine with reading it again. We discussed how much we should read for next week... most of the girls thought they would read the whole thing. I didn’t want girls to feel pressured to read it all yet. It is hard to balance this sense of identity I have here at this school—to the girls I am a teacher. I want them to be able to see me as someone other than a teacher; I’m hoping as time goes by in the group they will learn to look to each other as group members, as resources, rather than looking to me. Obviously I am the book lady and the “brings food” lady, but hopefully in discussions I will not be that “go to” person. We shall see and I need to actively reflect on how I move myself away from that role that I played so long—the role of teacher. (Analytical Memo, 3/8/07).

Profiles of Group Participants

In Chapter Four, I devote time, description, and analysis to individual profiles of each of the Book Group’s nine participants. These girls—their experiences, their voices, their shared confidences, their readings of the literature and the world that they live in—
are to me, the essence of this research. The driving force behind the design of this study was my desire to create and fully describe a space where girls felt comfortable to read, share, laugh, and explore their own readings of texts. Before I began an overall description of my data analysis and findings regarding the girls’ experiences in Book Group, I wanted to give space to who these girls are—or at least, who they narrated themselves to be through their own writing, their visual creation of Identity Artifacts, their responses to literature, and their own descriptions of what Book Group came to mean for them. I kept individual folders on each of the participants, which included the written artifacts they created as well as individual questionnaires and interview transcripts. In addition, to create the profiles in Chapter Four, I reread the transcripts from Book Group discussions and pulled information each of the girls’ shared about their own lives and experiences. Although these profiles were created using the girls’ own words and responses, they are still my creation and representation of the girls, and I am continually cognizant of this. Researchers can attempt to represent identities through their writing and analysis, but identities are fluid, multi-faceted and complex; written descriptions cannot fully encompass individual identities (Weis and Fine, 2000). However, the creation of these profiles in Chapter Four was provided to give a “sense” of the shared identity each girl presented in Book Group. In Chapter Five, I discuss the findings related to the Book Group as an overall case, although individual girls’ experiences are also mentioned. Including detailed profiles on each of the participants first offers a diversity and specificity that otherwise might be lacking.
The Listening Guide

The format of this research in many ways reads as a narrative, a narrative of these girls’ experiences in Book Group, their readings of the young adult literature we shared, and their own developing descriptions of their complex identities as adolescent female readers. This is an attempt to create a “voice-centered, relational research” (Taylor et al, 1995).

Analysis and readings of interviews and Book Group discussion transcripts was influenced heavily by a method of interpretive analysis described as The Listening Guide (Brown et al, 1988; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al, 1995). This analytical process involves multiple readings and re-readings of girls’ voices through analysis of their transcribed interviews and discussions. This process emphasizes the importance of honoring and featuring participants’ own words. Throughout this study, I have attempted to as accurately as possible represent and reproduce girls’ voices, thoughts, and words using the transcriptions from their own interviews and Book Group discussions.

An additional important piece in this analysis is the researcher’s reflection upon his/her own cultural backgrounds and assumptions, including what they bring to and how they might color or affect the interpretation of participants’ voices. “This method also guides the interpreter through a reader response process of making explicit and documenting how her own experience and personal history, including her cultural, social and familial frame of reference, may shape how she listens and what she hears” (Taylor et al, 1995, p. 14). There is emphasis then not only on who is speaking, but on who is listening; the relational nature of the research is important. Through my use of analytical memos (Jessup & Penny, 1999), I was able to spend time reflecting upon my own
reactions to and interpretations of the stories girls shared in book group, about their reactions to texts, and the ways in which I viewed their response to discourse about femininity and sexuality.

*The Listening Guide* method indicates reading through interviews, transcripts, and other pieces of participants' words at least four times. A first reading involves the researcher documenting their first impressions, identifying potential themes and tracking personal and emotional reactions to stories (done via analytical memos). This includes a reflection on how the researcher's own backgrounds and cultural experiences color the interpretation of the data. This was also done via analytical memo. In this way, a method of comparative analysis is established between the narrator's own voiced stories and the interpretations and reactions of the researcher.

This interpretive practice is explicitly feminist. It deliberately takes women's and girl's experiences as constitutive of human knowledge; it provides a way to analyze the psychology of voice and resonance within patriarchal societies and and attends to the differences in power that exist in the interview and the analysis by requiring those in positions of greater power to reflect on and reveal their personal circumstances. Power differences constitute the social reality in which psychological development occurs and these affect both development and how developmental research is carried out. This reflexivity introduces into our interpretation what bell hooks calls 'a politics of location' (hooks, 1990, p. 145; Taylor et al, 1995, p. 29).

Second readings of interviews involve the researcher concentrating on the first person narrator—the "I" voice. By analyzing and pulling out "I statements" the
researcher is better able to analyze how “the person speaking experiences herself in relation to the world in which she lives” (Taylor et al, 1995, p. 31). This second listening and layer of data analysis is “crucial to learning racial, cultural, and class differences as these differences affect that way a person speaks of or represents herself” (Taylor et al, 1995, p. 30). For my study, these “I statements” were pulled from data sources including reading questionnaires, identity artifacts, Book Group transcriptions and individual interviews and places in individual folders coded for each participant. These “I statements” were then used to analyze both individual and collective experiences of the Book Group participants. These “I statements” were particularly helpful for creating individual profiles of the Book Group participants as illustrated in Chapter Four.

The third and fourth readings of data sources are open to the particular needs and desires of the researcher—certain themes can be analyzed, or absence of themes. My further readings of transcripts were then used to code and develop themes for my second and third research questions—these readings looked first for examples of girls’ voiced identities and also for examples of social discourses regarding femininity and the body that girls identified within the texts we read. Similarly to domain analysis (Spradley, 1980), this is done through coding and theme development through the identification of categories and relationships. To help establish themes and codes, I combined both the Listening Guide and my previous experience with domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis (Spradley, 1980) as methods for data analysis. I began initial coding via line by line analysis of transcripts, questionnaires, and interviews. Using colored pencils, I began coding photo-copies of data sources, coding each individual theme with a separate color. After initial coding and analysis, I was able to group similar themes and codes
together. For example, when analyzing transcripts for my second research questions which examined girls’ sense of gendered identity, I eventually derived the overall theme of “Body Issues.” Underneath this theme I included earlier coded categories such as being pretty, weight issues, sexuality, body image, etc. Coding and grouping of categories was done after repeated readings and re-readings of data sources to increase validity and to insure as “full” a picture of themes as possible.

The actual number of readings of transcripts was far beyond third and fourth readings, transcripts and other data sources were continually read and reread throughout the process of data analysis and again during the actual writing of the dissertation. “Any number of readings is possible and any dimensions of relational experience may be followed” (Taylor et al, 1995, p 32). The final step in the Listening Guide is the development of case summaries of individual participants; these are represented in this study by girls’ individual profiles in Chapter Four.

Thematic Analysis: The Issues of Discourse

An additional method of thematic analysis was inspired by Norman Fairclough’s work in Critical Discourse Analysis (2003). CDA is concerned with describing and examining the ways in which texts, such as literature, magazines, advertising, films, etc. have certain ideological effects in reinforcing, defining, and maintaining existing discourse of power and control (Rogers, 2004). Hegemonic texts, such as those frequently read and viewed by adolescents often serve to replicate and reinforce social discourses about gender, race, power, and culture (Fairclough, 2003; Younger, 2003). “Drawing on poststructuralist discourse theory and critical linguistics, it focuses on how social relations, identity, knowledge, and power are constructed through written and
spoken texts in communities, schools, and classrooms" (Luke, 1997, p. 1). Fairclough also discusses how texts shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. For example, long term exposure to advertising, television, and films influences our identities not only as consumers and viewers, but as gendered individuals (1999). What is gathered and reenacted from these "texts" fits within a larger schema of social discourses. Discourses can be defined as ideologically based ways of knowing, thinking, and looking at the world (Chouliaraki & Fairlough, 1999; Gee, 1996; 1999).

Gee (1999, 2001) also describes cultural models which exist within discourses and function to define and support hierarchies in which certain social practices are valued over others. As individuals continually shape and form their own sense of identity, they are invariably affected and shaped by prevailing discourses that support some cultural models as preferential for their own sense of gendered, classed and raced identity (Gee, 2001; Holland et al, 2001). "Cultural models are stored in people’s minds (by no means always consciously), though they are supplemented and instantiated in the objects, texts, and practices that are part and parcel of the Discourse" (Gee, 2001, p. 720).

Although formal analytical methods associated with Critical Discourse Analysis were not used for this study, I did draw upon both Gee’s and Fairclough’s notions of social discourses, cultural models, and their associated issues of identity as a way of developing themes within the girls’ discussions of literature as well as connected topics that arose during Book Group discussions such as film, television, magazines, and the messages that are sent to adolescent girls about issues of appearance, gender, power, and identity. As I worked on my data analysis through both domain analysis and the interpretive framework of The Listening Guide, I considered overall discourses described
by girls within their interviews, identity artifacts, and Book Group discussions.

As research suggests that young adult literature often serves to represent and replicate dominant discourses about female sexuality and body image (Younger, 2003) students' responses to such literature were one means of examining and discussing the cultural models girls use to read their own lives as well as the textual lives of the characters in this literature. Critical discourse analysis draws upon a variety of theoretical frameworks (Luke, 1997; Fairclough, 1992). Perhaps most interesting for this study, critical discourse analysis builds upon Bourdieu's "assumption that actual textual practices and interactions with texts become 'embodied' forms of 'cultural capital' with exchange value in particular social fields" (Luke, 1997, p. 6).

By combining the organizational nature of Spradley's methods of domain analysis (1980) and the organizational framework of feminist rereadings provided by The Listening Guide with the theoretical notions about the ways in which texts and discourse reflect larger social discourses regarding issues of power, gender, and identity (Gee, 2001; Luke, 1997; Fairclough, 1992), I created a thematic analysis of the major data sources related to each research question. I initially did these as a domain analysis, with lists of related topics related to each research question. I then did further taxonomic and componential analyses of each developing theme, cutting and pasting from various data sources to allow full representation of data related to each theme. I wanted to use the girls' own words as much as possible to establish and reflect each theme that existed under its corresponding research question, and The Listening Guide's framework of "I statements" and repeated rereadings of participant voices aided in the creation of a voice centered narrative. I visited and revisited transcriptions countless times for coding and

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thematic analysis, attempting to use as many “telling quotes” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 65) as possible.

Once themes were established, I began the early stages of writing around each of these themes, first in the form of analytical memos and later in the dissertation itself. I attempted to include as much detail regarding the Book Group discussions themselves, the context of the situation, as well as the girls’ experiences and thoughts as voiced in their actual words. Certain themes overlapped across research questions, as will be illustrated in Chapter Five. Chapter Five looks specifically at my three main research questions and describes the major themes that developed under each question.

Limitations/Trustworthiness

Primary limitations for this study include the potential for researcher bias and the ability to generalize from the study. This study was conducted in a high school where I formerly taught, and did include participants who are former students of mine. Personal and professional relationships had been established prior to the research study, which may have affected students’ interactions with me and with texts in general. Participants who were members of my classroom in prior years were exposed to literature and reading practices that promote reader-centered response and the taking of a critical stance. This may privilege or alter the way they interacted with texts.

Participation in the study was voluntary and took place outside of the regular school day, which hopefully lessened the impact of my status as their former teacher. I was continually aware of my own researcher bias and the prior relationships I had established with many of the girls in the study. As Glesne (1999) suggests, it is often
impossible to keep subjectivity from creeping into our work as qualitative researchers, especially when we have emotional ties to those we are researching. In all forms of qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument in the research itself and interacts personally with the setting and with the people he or she is studying. It is inevitable then that the researcher's own values, beliefs, and experiences become a lens through which the world is viewed (Cintron, 1997). This personal lens must be acknowledged in order for such work to be responsible; my own experiences as a reader, as a teacher, as a woman, as a former adolescent girl all must be acknowledged and addressed. In addition, this study deals heavily with issues of the body and how they affect adolescent girls; as a woman living in the same "body obsessed" culture as these girls, I am by no means immune from many of the feelings and issues of my own body and how it has shaped and continues to shape my own sense of identity.

My own mental and ethical wrestling with all of these issues featured frequently in the analytical memos I created regarding my time with these girls in Book Group. I struggled to feel comfortable with my place in the research setting—to some girls I was their former teacher, to others who hadn't been my students, I was still a former teacher in this school. The actual Book Group itself met in the classroom of my best friend, who was several of the girls' teacher. At the same time as I struggled to shake my role as "teacher," I also was continually aware that I was the adult presence in this group of adolescent girls—and as much as they amazed and delighted me with their intelligence and their thoughtfulness, at other times I was both astounded and frustrated by their naivete and/or their false (or what I saw as limiting) views on topics such as sex, boys, and relationships. A further level of conflict involved what I often saw as the voyeuristic
nature of my work with the girls—they often confided deeply personal information in Book Group discussions, which definitely made for richly detailed data for later analysis, but as a teacher and a mother, I often worried deeply about these girls. I discuss many of these issues further in Chapter Six, under the findings and implications of the study.

Another limitation of the study is generalizability. This study was a qualitative, case study analysis of adolescent females’ experiences in literature discussions of young adult literature focusing on the adolescent body. The primary purpose was to clearly evoke the experiences of these particular girls in this case study. Qualitative research provides extensive opportunities to provide rich details and experiences from the perspectives of those involved in the study; however it is not designed to provide generalizability to a larger population (Glesne, 1999; Spradley, 1980). Conversely, qualitative research allows readers unfamiliar with a particular setting to understand the culture and world that is being described (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Spradley, 1980). It can also allow us to understand the deeper experiences and meaning of a particular social phenomenon, such as girls involved in critical discussions of the body, with as little disruption to the natural setting as possible (Merriam, 1998).
CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL PROFILES OF THE BOOK GROUP

In this chapter, I have constructed short profiles of each of the Book Group participants as a way of adding a richer layer of description regarding individual members of the Book Group and their experiences within the study. As two of my main research questions deal with girls’ own experiences and voiced identities as revealed through the Book Group study, devoting space to each of the girls’ individual profiles adds an important place for girls’ own thoughts and expressions to be voiced, as well as my own constructions and interpretations of the girls’ experiences.

These profiles incorporate a variety of data sources, including a written survey the girls completed at the beginning of the study as well as the Identity Artifacts they created and shared in Book Group discussions. In addition to these initial data sources, I also reviewed and coded individual girls’ responses to reveal themes and discourses present in their weekly conversations; these are discussed in further detail in Chapter Five as an overall case study, but major themes discussed by individual girls are highlighted here in their profiles as well. In addition, girls’ comments in their exit interviews are included in these profiles as well as later in more detail in Chapter Five.

These profiles were an important source of initial data analysis that helped inform, guide, and structure my continued analysis of the overall case of the Book Group. Although this study is an overall case study of the experiences and workings of a Book
Group made up of ten individuals, the experiences of these individual girls as gendered readers is integrally important to this research. As a researcher, the task of accurately representing these girls' voices and the narrated identities they shared with me during our time together involves what can only be a reproduction (Weis & Fine, 2000) of who these complex, multi-faceted young women are, but I have attempted to accurately and fully represent the tales they narrated during our time together. This is an attempt then to create a "voice-centered, relational research" (Taylor et al, 1995).

Jamie

Jamie is a vivacious, bubbly high school sophomore who is involved in the AVID program at the school as well as choir and dance team. Jamie was a student in my English 1 honors course during the 2005-2006 school year and I considered her to be one of the students I knew well. I was invited to and attended her Quincinier when she turned fifteen. Jamie said she was initially drawn to the idea of Book Group because "she knew me and knew that I liked good books for girls." Finding a space that was only for girls was important to Jamie, as she wanted to read "girls' books" and books about things girls experience like "relationships, weight issues, boys, and pregnancy."

Jamie often spoke warmly of her family, with whom she was close. She described her parents, especially her mom as "cool" and said that she wanted to be like her mom when she grew up. "My mom is my role model and if I ever have kids in my future I'm going to be just like her." She felt her parents gave her more freedoms than most of her friends' parents, especially her friends who were also Hispanic. She thought many of the kids she knew and also many of the characters we read about in Book Group

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had parents who were not supportive or understanding and that this had negative consequences.

Jamie was one of the few girls in the Book Group who had a serious boyfriend; she had been dating her boyfriend for a year and a half. The subject of her boyfriend came up frequently in Book Group discussions, both during informal social times and during formal literature discussions. One of the other participants, Carolina, who was close friends with Jamie, disliked her boyfriend and thought he was “controlling” and “possessive.” Indeed, often during Book Group discussions Jamie’s boyfriend would call her cell phone repeatedly or send text messages wanting to know when she would be finished with Book Group. He occasionally even came by the classroom we met in to push his face against the glass in the door. Jamie ignored his attempts to contact her, but said she felt conflicted by the amount of time he demanded from her. Below is a selection from a Book Group conversation between Jamie and Carolina about the book *Dreamland*, which features the issues of a controlling, abusive boyfriend:

Jamie: I think it’s hard though to have a friend who has a boyfriend that is that controlling.

Carolina: I know!

Jamie: I know, my boyfriend is like that. And he’s always like you need to be with me, and I’m like excuse you.

Carolina: Yeah, Jamie.

Jamie: I mean and then I still go out with him, because I feel bad and then I never end up seeing my girlfriends. Like all my friends that I had last year and I feel really mixed up, because I want to hang out with them, talk to them, and this is like, I try to tell him to go hang out with his friends so that I can have some time with my friends and he won’t. I mean if he goes out with his friends he wants me to come. I mean I need my friends...

Interestingly, Jamie talked about how much romance was important to her—she
loved romance books, said *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the most romantic stories she’d ever read, and often attributed the actions (both positive and negative) of characters in the books we read to “being in love.” Jamie was an avid reader and read frequently, but said all of her books had to be about “relationships” in some way or another. In addition to romance and relationships, another theme that followed much of Jamie’s discussions in the Book Group were books as a way of teaching girls—she often talked about how certain books were “good for girls to read” as they could teach them, warn them, or prepare them for important life lessons. Jamie said she wanted to read *Dreamland* “Because of all the things she’s going through with the boyfriend. I think it's a good book for a girl to read, because of what if you get to be with a guy and be really trustful with him and then he's mean to you.” She also self identified with the main character in *Dreamland*, as she felt she knew what it was like to let “being in love” get in the way of “standing up for herself.”

Maria

Maria was one of the quietest members of Book Group and she rarely shared in group discussions unless she was directly asked a question. She joined the book group discussion with her best friend Carolina, who was a former student of mine. On the one occasion that Carolina could not come to Book Group because she had to make up a French test, Maria did not attend either. Although Maria did not talk much in Book Group she said that the experience of joining has been important to her as, “I picked up a lot and I enjoyed listening to what other people thought.”

Maria also felt that the Book Group had helped her reconnect with reading the
way she had in junior high. As an honors student, Maria felt most of her reading time
was being “sucked up” by the required books she read for homework and she relished the
opportunity to read books written for young adults again.

When Maria did talk in Book Group she voiced her observations about how girls
are pressured to look a certain way or to perform a certain way for boys to like them. She
also had many negative things to say about boys in general and like many of the girls,
thought that guys “ruined things” or made things “too hard.” She reacted very strongly
to the initial sex scene in the book *Dreamland.* Maria later shared in her exit interview
that this scene had been especially poignant for her as she related to the main character
Caitlin as she loses her virginity. “Because, what happened to her, with her boyfriend,
like that happened to me. When she slept with him, she expected them to get closer and
instead he treats her like a piece of trash. I thought that was really realistic…she thought
it was going to solve things and it didn’t.”

Issues of appearance were also very important to Maria; she was always
impeccably dressed and talked often in the informal social part of Book Group about
clothes, hairstyles, and fashion. Although quite thin, she said that reading the book *Life
in the Fat Lane* had now made her afraid she could potentially gain weight. Although
acknowledging that she could eat largely whatever she wanted and not gain weight (she
was usually the first one to suggest snacks I should bring to future meetings like ice
cream or pizza), she did mention her mother’s history with anorexia and food issues,
which she thought had rubbed off on her indirectly. These issues of appearance,
relationships with boys, and body image featured prominently into the limited sharing
that Maria did during Book Group discussions.
Tammy was not only a former student of mine, she is one of the girls I write about in Chapter One’s introduction; she was one of my “readers” who had lingered after class with a few of her friends to discuss, swap, and share books that we had read and loved. Tammy is an avid reader and an excellent student—she is also involved in the school’s graphic arts club and takes several AP courses. Even while managing a heavy scholastic load, Tammy says she still reads for pleasure an average of 1-2 hours per night. Some of her favorite books that she literally raved about during Book Group discussions were God Don’t Like Ugly, Cut, Counterfeit Son, and The Color Purple. At the same time that she relished these titles, she spent considerable time complaining about the required reading in her American Literature course—she bitterly despised both Animal Farm and The Red Badge of Courage which her class was reading during the time period of the Book Group meetings.

Tammy’s personal idol and role model was Oprah Winfrey and she often brought up issues or current events she had viewed on the Oprah show. She also loved the Tyra Banks show but admitted that, “Tyra ain’t got nothin’ on Oprah!” Tammy said she often turned to the Oprah show for advice on important life issues and confided that she very rarely went to her mother to share personal information or as a source of assurance or guidance. Tammy took particular pride in being a support system for her younger sister, as Tammy did not want to see her go through the same troubles she had.

Early on in Book Group discussions, Tammy revealed to the group that she had had a serious problem with cutting and self-mutilation while she was in junior high school. I was initially shocked and surprised by her personal admissions and the depth to
which she shared about her struggles to stop cutting after her mother discovered the problem and took her to counseling. In her exit interview, Tammy explained that she shared the information because she wanted those of us who did not “get” the book to understand the character who cuts and how important it is.

I mean, I wanted to give them insight. I wanted them to understand it. Cause it surprises me how many people don't know about it (cutting). And it's SO MASSIVE (emphasis), it's epic and like, it's like, you don't get this, but maybe I can help you get it. Cause I like to help people and help people understand. I like to educate people about it (exit interview, 05/09/07).

Tammy also shared other personal stories during book group discussions about going to family counseling, her parents’ divorce, and her wild behavior during junior high, which included substance abuse and “huffing.” She felt that high school had given her a new chance and that she was different in high school, that she had finally focused on her academics. After having Tammy as a student during her freshman year of high school, I was actually quite shocked to hear about her past destructive behavior; in class Tammy came across as the ideal student, concerned with her grades, and confident in her own abilities and beliefs.

Tammy often had very strong reactions to the events and characters in the books we read and her comments could often be labeled as “judging”—if she disagreed with a character’s actions or thoughts, she would argue passionately about why they should behave differently. Tammy had a long term boyfriend who she described as her best friend and someone she could tell anything to. Perhaps because of this, she often found many of the boyfriend-girlfriend relationships described in the literature we read as
shallow and frustrating. Tammy was a very active participant in Book Group discussions and probably one of the most vocal, challenging voices present.

Sydney

Sydney, like Tammy, was one of the original “book girls” who helped inspire this study. Sydney is shy and sweet and embarrasses easily; she rarely spoke in class, so I was extremely excited when she decided to join Book Group as I’d worried she might be too shy to join a discussion based group. Sydney was probably the most voracious reader of the group—even when we decided to spend two weeks reading a particular title, Sydney always finished the book during the first week of reading. It became a common joke in Book Group that someone needed to steal Sydney’s books from her to keep her from reading ahead of the rest of the group. Sydney said that she read “as much as possible” and confessed to often skipping school assignments to read books she wanted to read. Despite this, Sydney remained an honor roll student enrolled in AP courses. She actively browsed the Internet and used book stores for books she might like and said that she had become somewhat of a “lending library” for her friends. When we read the novel *Cut* as a group, Sydney had her own copy of the novel she chose to reread; it was so “well loved” that it was falling apart; she confessed that she’d read the book “at least six times.”

Although soft-spoken and often self-deprecating in her comments, Sydney was an active, thoughtful contributor to the Book Group discussions. Those of us who knew Sydney in other arenas expressed our surprise at how vocal Sydney was in weekly discussions. Even Sydney herself seemed surprised, commenting that she couldn’t
believe how much she'd shared in Book Group compared to class. In one of the weekly
cussions, Sydney became very excited over a point of discussion and ended up
interrupting another girl in the group. Desiree teasingly chastised Sydney for
interrupting:

Desiree: Oh my gosh, that was so horrible and so desperate. You realized how
desperate she was, right? I can’t...

Sydney: Yeah, it was sick and I was worried she was going to end up in the
hospital. But also, it was not as horrible as if she's been throwing up. Maybe
that's just me. I couldn't imagine throwing up or being bulimic. I cry whenever I
throw up.

Tammy: Me too!

Desiree: Sydney made me forget my comment!

Sydney: I'm sorry, I just talked right over you.

Ms. L: This is weird after having Sydney in class. Chatty Sydney, talking over
people...

(laughter).

Sydney: Yeah, well I don't like to talk in class!

Sydney commented in her exit interview that she credited the small nature of the
Book Group with offering her a safe space to talk and discuss her ideas. “I share way
more in Book Group than I do in class. There’s too many people in class. The small
group really helped me.” Sydney also shared many confidences and personal information
within Book Group, describing her own struggles with cutting, a suicide attempt in junior
high and her parents sending her to counseling. She also had family responsibilities that
involved having to look out for her brother, even though he was older than she was.

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Despite being very well read, Sydney's comments in Book Group often reflected her own innocence and naivety; she confessed to having never been kissed and desperately hoped it would happen before her sixteenth birthday in two months. Her comments about boys, sex, and relationships often reflected this innocence and sometimes were full of fallacies. For example, Sydney expressed shock during our reading and discussion of *Dreamland*, because the main character makes out with a boy she barely knows. Sydney was concerned that this was dangerous behavior and that perhaps the girl would catch an STD from making out with this boy. I corrected her misunderstanding of how STDs are transmitted, but Sydney wasn't so sure she believed me.

Sydney: Yeah, he takes her home and she doesn't even know him and then they end up making out in his car forever. I mean, what if he had a disease, what if he had gonorrhea or something?

Ms. L: I don't think you can catch gonorrhea from kissing.

Sydney: Still, you never know...

Although clearly well liked and respected by the other members of Book Group, Sydney still displayed a lack of self-confidence that came through in our weekly discussions. When asked to create an Identity Artifact to illustrate her own sense of self, Sydney drew a body biography that had great symbolic significance, including a figure that wore "a mask just because I think that shows how I'm always trying to hide my vulnerability" and "a top hat and cane, because I'm always putting a show on to meet people's standards."
Carolina

Carolina is a soft-spoken girl who described herself frequently in relationship to her dreams for the future. She is a part of the AVID program at the school and hopes to be the first person in her family to attend college. She is Mexican American and says that her parents came to America so that she can have “something better and the hope of becoming someone and something.” She is a dedicated student and says that the demands of her honors courses have kept her from reading for pleasure the way she did in junior high. She loves books by Laurie Halse Anderson though and says *Speak* and *Fever* are her two favorite titles. She felt the Book Group was good for her as it “got her reading again and I couldn’t wait each week to read a new book, such good books.”

Carolina’s father abandoned the family and went back to Mexico a little over two years ago and Carolina is still dealing with what she describes as her feelings of “shock and anger.” Carolina’s mother has responded to her new role as a single parent by trying to protect Carolina from the influence of boys—she doesn’t want Carolina to date until she’s eighteen. Carolina thinks her mother is afraid she will either “get pregnant or married too young instead of going to college.” While Carolina complained about this during the social time of Book Group, she also often had negative things to say about boys overall. In her Identity Artifact, Carolina drew a picture of a broken heart, saying, “For the dark side, it says guys, because they just break your heart.” She was also adamant that it was vital for the Book Group to remain a place for girls only—she said she would only return to another Book Group if it were only for girls. When asked how the Book Group might have been different if boys were involved, Carolina said:
I wouldn’t have joined. I wouldn’t have been able to share or be that comfortable if boys were there. I liked having a space away from class where I didn’t have to worry about what boys would think about what I had to say (exit interview, 05/09/07).

Carolina was a quiet voice in the Book Group discussions and often did not speak frequently during weekly conversations. However, her comments were always very thoughtful and often challenged the views of other girls, especially when girls would make excuses for poor behavior on the part of characters. Carolina clearly expected the girls in the books we read to make wise choices and was frustrated when they didn’t. The issues of morals and judgments were common in her comments—she was especially troubled by the issues of cutting, drug use, loss of virginity, and eating disorders that were described in the novels we read. Carolina was far more outspoken in Book Group than she had been in my English class, where she rarely, if ever spoke without being called upon. When asked why she was able to talk more freely in Book Group, she said, I also just feel really comfortable with you. I trust you. Having you last year in English. And the girls…I don’t really know them all, but I felt I could trust them. Even though I didn’t know the girls, it didn’t seem like a group that would go running around telling things you said (Carolina, exit interview, 05/09/07).

Bethany

When Bethany first joined Book Group, I was surprised to see her. She had been my student two years prior in my English I honors class. During the year she was in my
class, her father, a Christian minister had not allowed her to read several of the required
texts for our class, including the novel *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, citing its use
of profanity for his objections. So, when she showed up for Book Group with the signed
permissions, I asked her if her dad knew the sort of books we’d be reading and she
assured me that he was “not as bad with her as he used to be about things.”

Bethany was also the only girl who had previously participated in a book group,
although the group she had been a part of was tied to her church’s youth group and they
had read inspirational books rather than fiction or novels. She said she looked forward to
Book Group as there would be no boys present. During her exit interview she also
explained that she wouldn’t have joined the group if boys had been involved.

Cause I’ve been in not necessarily a book group, but a small group like
this through church and it’s hard to be open, because boys crack up jokes
about everything girls say, because they think girls are stupid and ditzy.
And so I just know I wouldn’t have joined if there had been boys (exit
interview, 5/10/07).

Bethany explained that she felt she had become “less and less” of a reader over
the years, because most of what she read was for school and it just was “boring.” She
confessed that she frequently did not do her required school reading as it seemed
pointless to her. She acknowledged that her grades suffered because she didn’t want to
do the reading, but she was willing to accept the lower grades rather than read things she
didn’t want to read. During the Book Group, Bethany was consistently ahead of the other
girls in her reading and often had to remind herself not to “spill the beans” to other group
members. While usually it took her “forever to read a book,” she found that she loved
the books for Book Group and eagerly anticipated each one. “I can’t remember which one, but I sat down and read it in like one day. And one of them I almost cried on. I think it was *Dreamland.*”

Bethany found *Dreamland* to be the book she connected to the most during her reading and discussions, as she had issues with boyfriends in the past who were controlling or abusive, explaining, “I mean probably of all my relationships, all of them except for the one I’m in now, have involved abuse in some kind of way...you know mentally, sometimes physically.” Reading the book was a cathartic and eye-opening experience for her. “Like you know, after reading that, I’m so aware of that with my boyfriend. If I catch a warning sign the relationship is over. I’m not going to go through that again. I’m more valuable and I’m worth more than that.”

During our weekly book group conversations, Bethany often used the discussion time to clarify points she had misunderstood or didn’t understand; she often had questions about characters, plot events, or textual structures that she brought to the group for answers. More so than any other member except for perhaps myself, Bethany “wondered aloud” and provided questions that spurred on conversations with fellow group members.

**Felicity**

Felicity was a part of what is termed the “goth crowd” at the high school and she generally wore long black skirts and jackets and heavy black makeup. Her mother was a teacher at the high school and she had a twin sister who also attended the school who Felicity described as the “good twin.” Felicity was in honors classes and her mother had
pushed for her to be enrolled in the AVID program, hoping it would help Felicity do her homework and stay up on her grades. During the time of the Book Group discussion, Felicity noted that she was failing the vast majority of her classes and was "perpetually grounded." In fact, Book Group was the one after school activity that her mother continued to allow her to participate in.

Despite being a poor student, Felicity was an avid reader and always had her own books with her in addition to whatever book we were reading for the Book Group. She credited her grandmother with making her a "reader" and she and her grandmother continually traded and shared books. She also said she spent almost all of her allowance and free money on books. When asked if she used the public library, she said she preferred not to as she liked owning the books herself. Although all of the titles we read together during Book Group were realistic fiction, Felicity normally gravitated to romance and fantasy novels; she especially loves novels about vampires.

As much as she loved to read, Felicity avoided assigned school reading as much as possible, complaining wryly that, "Those books aren't just for reading. Those books come with packets!" Felicity said English was actually one of her least favorite classes as it took all the fun out of reading for her. She said she wouldn't join a book group if it were run by her English teacher, because she didn't think she knew how to talk about or pick the right books.

Felicity spoke very infrequently in Book Group discussions and when she did, she rarely offered new talking points or questions to be discussed. Most of her comments were usually affirming or agreeing with something another participant had said or answering a literal, plot point questions such as, "How old was the character" that
someone needed clarified. She did discuss the issue of the father in the novel *Life in the Fat Lane* in some detail; this was our last Book Group discussion of the study and I wondered if perhaps the Book Group had continued for longer would Felicity have become a more vocal part of the group. When asked in her exit interview if the group had started at the beginning of the year and we'd been together longer would it be easier to share, Felicity said that it probably would. Felicity was much more chatty and talkative in one on one situations and often stayed after formal Book Group meetings had ended to talk with me about books, her grades, or other topics that were on her mind.

**Desiree**

Desiree was one of the most vocal members of Book Group and she was the only member of the group to join without either knowing me already or coming based upon the recommendation of a friend or teacher who knew me. In fact, Desiree had been absent on the day I gave the informational talks in the language arts classrooms, but heard about it from some other girls at lunch and came to the informational meeting on her own. Desiree was active in the school's drama program and had major roles in several of the theater productions. She felt her background in drama and theater helped her express her ideas easily in front of others and said that when there were long pauses in our Book Group discussions that she wanted to “fill them with her voice.” She also found the group an easy place to share because of her drama background. “Well, it’s kind of my job to be personal in a public space, because of like, acting and all.” Desiree was the only participant who never complained about or expressed nervousness with the fact that I was video taping them; in fact Desiree used to sneak before Book Group was over and
Desiree loved to read and often referred to other books she was reading or had read when discussing characters, style, or textual features of the Book Group novels. She also bought several Sarah Dessen novels to read after finishing *Dreamland*, saying she “loved the way that woman writes!” She kept several books with her at all times, often pulling books out of her backpack to show us what she was reading.

Desiree’s role in Book Group discussions was often that of playing devil’s advocate. She liked to argue with others’ points of view and said she had joined Book Group hoping for the chance to “debate” about books. It sometimes seemed as if Desiree would argue a point just to argue it, as she’d then quickly change her argument once someone agreed with her. She also liked to try to shock other Book Group participants. For example, one day we were discussing the upcoming final Harry Potter book due out that summer. The girls were guessing who might die and Desiree declared, “I really hope that Harry Potter will die.” The rest of the girls gasped in disbelief and horror and then Desiree smirked at them, saying, “I always hope the main characters will die! I’m sick that way!”

Desiree said she related strongly to the themes and issues in the novel, *Life in the Fat Lane*. “I mean when she was going on about size this, size that, and I’m like a size 14. I think a lot of us were like, oh, we could relate to that.” This was one of the only times Desiree presented herself in a way other than confident and secure. At several points during the Book Group discussions of *Life in the Fat Lane*, Desiree said she identified with the “fat friend” and found the book “depressing.” Still, she attempted to use humor to deflect some of this honesty. “I was eating while I was reading! And then I
wanted another bag of chips,” she shared with the group, laughing as she said it. She then said, “You know a size 12/14 is not so bad after all.”

Melissa

Melissa was perhaps the quietest member of the Book Group discussion; she rarely spoke unless spoken to and even during social time was often very shy and quiet. Although she was friendly with Tammy and Sydney, two more talkative members of the group, she usually just listened as they talked and only occasionally spoke up. During the sharing of her Identity Artifact at the beginning of the study, she stated that she didn’t like talking in front of people. When she did speak in Book Group, she often did so with her head down, avoiding eye contact or in a very hushed voice.

She said she didn’t have as much free time as she’d like as she had lots of homework for her honors courses as well as many family responsibilities and chores, including babysitting her niece and nephew every weekend. She wasn’t involved in any other extra-curricular activities at school other than Book Group.

Melissa was the participant I found hardest to collect data on; her answers on questionnaires and in interviews were often short, to the point, or almost one word answers. She “no showed” for our final interview and I was never able to reschedule another interview with her. She posted to the blog only once. Although she spoke very rarely in Book Group, she was present every week and she had clearly read the books and when pressed would offer her opinions, which were often insightful and thoughtful, although again, it was difficult to get more than a sentence or two from her. She did say
that she often discussed the books with Tammy and Sydney away from Book Group, so perhaps even the small setting of Book Group was intimidating to her.

Discussion

Within the group dynamics of Book Group, each of the girls reported in their exit interviews that they found the group to be a "safe space" to share and discuss literature and their own personal lives. All of the girls came to Book Group knowing at least one other participant, several came to Book Group with a close friend. The girls who were participants seemed to naturally "click" and although I had drawn up lists of guidelines for Book Group discussions, the girls themselves largely governed the group effectively, encouraging and welcoming each other's thoughts and comments. Although certain girls were more vocal or outgoing in Book Group than others, no one dominated the conversation or the discussion time. Although girls sometimes disagreed with others' point of view or perceptions of a book or character, which is to be expected and encouraged in a setting such as Book Group, the girls were always respectful in the way that they disagreed with each other.

Overall, the Book Group was the most pleasant literature discussion environment I have ever witnessed, after years of running literature circle discussions in classes at the high school and university level. Perhaps the voluntary nature of the group itself lent itself well to cohesiveness; all of the girls in this group were here willingly and voluntarily. In addition, the group did not contain any girls who had difficult personalities, at least not that they displayed in Book Group. Even Desiree and Tammy, who were probably the most outspoken and vocal members of the group, always
communicated their thoughts and opinions in a non-confrontational manner. The girls themselves all expressed that they found Book Group to not only be a “safe space” but a place that they would like to return to again in the future. Desiree expressed dismay when the group meetings came to an end; all of the girls expressed in their exit interviews that they would love to join a book group again, depending upon who was running it. Several girls asked if I would be back next year to run Book Group and were disappointed when I told them I was moving to another state over the summer. I have encouraged my former colleagues in the language arts department at the school to consider forming a girls’ book group next year, citing the girls’ desire for continued group readings.

The creation of these short profiles only offers small glimpses into each girl’s presence in weekly Book Group meetings. However, I have attempted to offer a description of each girl using her own words and the narrated tellings each shared during interviews, surveys, Identity Artifacts and literature discussions. Major themes for each participant were discussed, derived from domain, taxonomic and componential analysis done on each girl’s responses during Book Group discussions as well as “I statements” catalogued from The Listening Guide. The creation of these profiles was also an important step in data analysis and description, as looking at individual girls’ responses helped inform and align my thinking as I began the analysis of the case study of the Book Group as a whole, found in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, adolescent female readers participated in an after-school literature based discussion group or “Book Group” as we came to call it, reading young adult novels that deal with issues of the body. The purpose of this study was to examine the adolescent girls’ experiences within the literature discussions, as most studies relating to literature circle discussions, book clubs, or book groups do not focus on the students’ experiences (Alvermann et al, 1996, 1999; Evans 2002). In addition, this study sought to explore the question of how literature based discussion groups might reveal adolescent girls’ narrated descriptions of their own complex identities as gendered readers. Finally, this study examined how girls in Book Group identified certain discourses about what it means to be a girl or other notions of embodied, hegemonic femininity in the texts we read together, and the means by which participants either “took up” or resisted these dominant social discourses about femininity and being a girl.

An important component in this study was the use of young adult literature titles for group reading and discussion. This study offered adolescent girls opportunities to socially discuss and deconstruct young adult literature that they normally would not be offered within the standard school curriculum. We read five books together in Book Group; each of the titles is listed below with a short plot synopsis.
• *Cut*, by Patricia McCormick (2000) is the story of Cally, a high school girl who self mutilates or “cuts.” The book opens in a psychiatric facility, where Cally is a patient; she refuses to share with her counselor or with the other girls who are a part of her group therapy about why she cuts. In fact, the reader quickly realizes that Cally isn’t quite sure herself why she cuts. Over the course of the novel, through voiced flashbacks Cally eventually shares with her therapist, the reader learns of the family tensions and troubles Cally has internalized as she struggles to understand why she is harming herself.

• *Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen (2000) is the story of Caitlin, a high school junior who wakes up on her sixteenth birthday to discover that her older sister Cassie has “run away” two weeks before she is due to leave for Yale. In the family chaos that ensues, Caitlin is virtually forgotten by her parents. When Caitlin meets Rogerson, another high school student, she is drawn to his mysterious, quiet demeanor and finds solace in her relationship with him. However, their romance quickly sours as Rogerson demonstrates an abusive side—he physically and emotionally abuses Caitlin. She is torn between what she feels for him and the fear she also hides from her family and friends.

• *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2006) is set in a rural village in Nepal and tells the tale of 13-year-old Lakshmi, from an impoverished family. Written in poignant, poetic vignettes, *Sold* tells the tale of how Lakshmi’s selfish, gambling stepfather sells her to a woman who trades girls for teenage prostitution in India. Believing she is going to the city to become a maid for a rich family, Lakshmi is horrified and desperate when she learns what her real fate is to become. She is imprisoned
and beaten by Mumtaz, the cruel madam at the Indian brothel and spends her days wondering how she will escape in a land where she can neither speak nor read the language.

- *Life in the Fat Lane* by Cherie Bennett (1998) is a story of Lara, a teenaged beauty queen who comes from what she thinks of as a “picture perfect” family. Her life and thoughts revolve around her appearance and popularity, until she contracts a disease that makes her unexpectedly gain weight uncontrollably. Over the course of the novel, Lara goes from 118 pounds to over 200 pounds. Unable to control her weight and her body, Lara seeks desperate measures to deal with her weight gain and what she perceives as her loss of herself.

- *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (2003) is the story of Bobby and Nia, a young couple in love who learn on Bobby’s sixteenth birthday that they are about to become parents. The story is told in a series of alternating flashbacks, as the reader watches Nia and Bobby struggle to cope with her unplanned pregnancy and the subsequent birth of their daughter, Feather.

These novels were selected by the Book Group participants from a selection of twelve titles I initially “book talked” to the girls. All of the novels in some way tied in to issues relating to the body. Feminist research has illustrated the power that issues of the body have in forming both adolescent females’ public (schooled) and private identities; social discourse and messages surrounding the body and female appearance largely shape adolescent girls’ sense of self and well being (hooks, 1990; Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 2006). Recent research suggests that discussion based forums can open up spaces for girls to critically examine popular notions of femininity, as well as their own experiences and
thoughts about their bodies (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Inspired by the work of researchers in girls’ studies such as Barbieri (1995), Brown (1998), Taylor et al (1995), Finders (1997), and Cherland (1994), I have attempted to relay my analysis and findings in a narrative format that closely links to these girls’ own voices. In this way, girls are given the chance to become “first person narrators” in research related to gender, feminism, and human development (Taylor et al, 1995). My charge is to retell their stories and to give voice to their words as fully and accurately as possible. I am naturally drawn then to a narrative of storytelling—as I share the words, the voices, and the identities that these girls revealed to me over our time together.

Question One:

What are the perceptions of adolescent females about the experience of participating in literature based discussions of young adult literature featuring issues tied to the body?

In analyzing data sources for question one, four main themes emerged from domain and taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1980) as well as the interpretive framework of The Listening Guide (Brown et al, 1988; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al, 1995; Brown, 1998). The girls described their experiences in Book Group in profoundly positive ways and felt the group offered them something meaningful, special, and different than other reading experiences and/or school-related activities. Book Group became an important “space” or “place” for the girls in the study. In many ways, Book Group became an important “in between space” (Moje, 2002) for girls as it navigated important aspects of both schooled and unschooled aspects of the girls’ lives, what Moje
(2002) describes as a “hybrid space.” Thus, Book Group became a space separate from other aspects of their lives as students, as girls, and as readers. The Book Group became:

1) A space to hear and to be heard...
2) A warm, safe space...
3) A space to read naturally...
4) A space away from boys...

_A Space to Hear and be Heard_

The girls discussed frequently in their exit interviews that they had initially joined Book Group to hear what other girls had to say about books. They wanted a space to share communally in the reading experience—to not read in isolation, but to read collectively and to hear what other readers had to say about the literature. All of the girls said in their exit interviews that part of what motivated them to initially join the Book Group was the desire to hear other girls’ voices and opinions. As Carolina said, “I just thought it would be interesting to see what other girls think about the same issues that we have” (exit interview, 5/9/07). Even girls who shared very little themselves in Book Group discussions found this communal nature of Book Group appealing and validating. Maria, who was largely quiet during Book Group discussions said, “I think I picked up a lot and I enjoyed listening to what other people thought” (exit interview, 5/9/07).

The girls found the Book Group to also be a place where they could be heard and express their opinions about topics that were important to them. They also found it to be an easy place to express themselves openly. Sydney, who normally finds speaking in front of others “embarrassing” and “painful” exclaimed once in Book Group, “Wow! I really don’t know what it is about this group or these books, but I can really talk here
about what I think” (4/12/07). Sydney described the Book Group as a place of
“enjoyment” where she could share her thoughts and opinions freely. She credits the
small, intimate nature of Book Group with her ability to speak freely. “I share way more
in Book Group than I do in class. There’s too many people in class. The small group
helped” (Sydney, exit interview, 5/10/07). Others agreed that the small group gave them
opportunities to speak that they might not get in larger settings. Tammy described the
size of the group as “ideal.”

Carolina, who stated that she rarely speaks in her classes, found a place to be
heard in Book Group. “It was fun and speaking out like what you believe, it was really
important to me. It was important to me to be able to say what I believed and have
people want to hear what I have to say” (exit interview, 5/9/07).

A Warm, Safe Space...

From the very first literature discussion surrounding the book Cut (McCormick,
2000), the girls began to divulge information that would be considered personal,
confidential, and revealing. In fact, I was shocked by the deluge of personal information
that came from this, our very first Book Group discussion. Although we had met
together twice previously and some of the girls knew me and most knew at least one
other participant, I was surprised by how quickly the participants revealed private
information. We had discussed privacy issues prior to this first meeting and had agreed
to strictly adhere to the code of “what is said here, stays here,” but nothing prepared me
for the level of disclosure that quickly developed within the group. Over the weeks we
met, girls shared personal stories of self-mutilation and cutting, psychiatric treatment,
suicide attempts, absentee parents, fathers who had left the family for a new girlfriend, not knowing who their father was, abusive boyfriends, etc.

Even after over a decade of teaching high school where I had seen and heard many personal stories from adolescents, I was amazed at the way girls disclosed so readily in front of their peers. In addition, several of these girls I’d had as former students and while I knew some of the stories they shared in Book Group, many of them shocked me with their revelations of past drug abuse, self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts. In each girl’s exit interview I asked them to describe what it was that prompted them to share personal information in Book Group.

Time and time again, girls used the words “safe spot,” “safe place,” “comfortable,” and “trust” to describe the atmosphere of Book Group. The girls again described the small nature of the group as a reason they found it a place they could feel safe, as well as the fact that the group members remained consistent throughout the study. They also cited the all-female nature of the group as something that encouraged disclosure. As Maria said, “Plus there are just things I wanted to talk about that you can’t really talk about in front of boys in class” (exit interview, 5/9/07). They also said it helped that they all at least knew someone else in the group; many felt it was important that they knew me as well. Carolina said, “I also just felt really comfortable with you. I trust you. Having you last year in English. And the girls...I don’t really know them all, but I felt I could trust them...it didn’t seem like a group that would go running around telling things you said” (exit interview, 5/9/07).
As an English teacher, I was initially drawn to reader response inspired methods of literature instruction because I recognized the artificial ways in which schooled literacy instruction deprives students of the natural joy and discovery of reading and books. In the “real world” of reading, we never fill out packets about the books we read or assign ourselves lists of vocabulary words to look up as we finish chapters of a beloved novel. The girls in this study often contrasted the reading experiences of Book Group with schooled spaces for reading. Several girls used the term “natural” to describe what we were doing in Book Group—readers naturally read chapters as they want, without assignments attached to them. Readers naturally want to discuss literature with other readers—not write essays about symbolism or character development or take quizzes and tests on important plot points. Readers naturally want to choose what they read—not have books forced upon them. In the words of the girls in Book Group, the experiences they had with literature and books that were “natural” were largely associated with the reading they did outside of school.

In their initial surveys girls said schooled reading consisted of: political background books, histories, textbooks, essays, and classics. Each girl said that historical reading and history was the predominant form of schooled reading they were assigned. When asked about what types of books they naturally gravitated towards, the majority of the girls said they preferred contemporary books about real life social issues facing adolescent girls, in other words realistic fiction novels, which were the focus of our Book Group reading.
Book Group also was about choices, something they felt they had little of in their school reading. Although all of the girls in Book Group reported in their exit interview that they would like to join a book group or book club again in the future, they emphasized that if the group were run through the school as an extra-curricular activity such as ours was, it would depend on who ran the group—and how. As Bethany said:

They have to let us read what we want to read. And we all need to have a say in what we want to read. Like for you, when we all read, we all got to choose different books and you came in and we picked the books. You let us have our freedom of speech, you weren’t a teacher, per se (Bethany, exit interview, 5/10/07).

They contrasted the reading they did for Book Group with the reading they did in school, particularly in language arts classes. English class reading was largely tied to assignments such as note taking, packets, essays, vocabulary, quizzes and tests. Discussion and personal response were never mentioned as activities linked to their English courses, although two girls who had been my former students did mention the literature circles and reader’s journals we kept in my classroom, but then commented that they didn’t do those in their current language arts course where they mainly did text annotations.

In fact, when I first introduced the concept of how a literature circle discussion functions to the girls, I gave each of the girls a packet of “Post-Its” or “stickies” to use when they read their books. I suggested they could write down any questions or comments they wanted to discuss on the stickies and place them in their book at the appropriate spots. I even told them that these were not for marking literary terms or
symbolism, per se, but could be used for anything they wanted to talk about. During our first Book Group discussion I was surprised to see that only one girl had marked her book with stickies, Melissa. When I asked the girls if they didn’t like this method for remembering questions or topics for discussion, they said that it reminded them of annotations and that they “hated those.” Although I continued to mark my books with stickies throughout the study and used them to track my own questions and topics for discussion, the girls never did pick up this practice and actively resisted it. I didn’t press the issue as I wanted Book Group to be a place of positive reading experiences for the girls.

Several of the girls said that the reading they did in Book Group was more “natural” than the type of reading they did in school. They did not have to read a chapter a night, but were able to read at their own pace. They associated Book Group with words like “fun,” “enjoyment,” “natural,” and “meaningful.” Schooled reading was “boring,” “unnatural,” and had “no choices.” Felicity, someone who described herself as loving books said about English class reading:

You know, those books aren’t just for reading. Those books come with packets. Like if you are reading for English, you have to dissect every part and with this, you don’t. When you read for English you read a couple chapters here, a couple chapters there, when you read for you and for Book Group, you read until you want to stop or until you have to (Felicity, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Desiree’s comments reflect the overall theme and topics of the girls’ responses to how Book Group was a more natural space to read and discuss.
Well, reading a book for English, it's more like the pace, isn't natural. I mean, books in here are not as fast as I normally read, but it's better than a book every three months, which is how long it takes to finish a book in English with all the other stuff you have to do mixed in. And I don't have to do a bunch of vocabulary and assignments and essays, so it's a lot more enjoyable and to be able to discuss that book with someone else with like a group of students and not have to do essays and vocabulary and all that on the side is just a lot more enjoyable (Desiree, exit interview, 5/10/07).

_A Space Away from Boys...

As this study is grounded in research from areas including adolescent female identity, girls' literacy studies, and issues of the body unique to adolescent girls, it was a natural part of the study design to make this a "girls only" reading group. Although I anticipated that having a "girls only" group might make some girls more comfortable and would help focus the books we chose and the topics we discussed, I did not fully anticipate how important this "girls only" space would become to the participants.

Several of the girls said they would not have joined the Book Group if it had not been an all girls group. They credited the all female aspect with their ability to share openly and many thought that boys would open the group up to more divisiveness and dissention. Desiree felt that having boys present might give them a different picture of what happened in some of the books but feared that it would also open the group to "more arguments." Carolina felt boys would dominate the group and discount what girls had to say. She felt this already happened in her academic classes. "I liked having a space away from class where I didn’t have to worry about what boys would think about
what I had to say” (exit interview, 5/9/07). Felicity too identified the book group as a “place to get away from guys” (exit interview, 5/9/07).

The girls also felt that they wouldn’t have been able to read the same books if boys were present and that they would have to read books that boys liked, which they might not like as much as the choices we’d selected for discussion. As Tammy said, “I was thinking about that too, because there were a lot of ‘bad guys’ in the books we read. Plus boys have to joke around through the tough things and like, all the guys I can think about who read books, they read like not emotional, self books” (exit interview, 5/9/07).

Bethany agreed, thinking boys would have discounted the girls’ choices in books, “They would have thought these were chick books” (exit interview, 5/10/07).

In addition, when the topic of boys came up during actual Book Group discussions, overall the picture that girls painted of boys was not positive. They felt boys were responsible for many of the struggles girls had to fit in at school. As Jamie said, “Boys don’t make it easier. Boys make everything harder for girls” (4/12/07). Tammy agreed, saying,

But most of girls’ problems are boys. I’m sorry, but they are. It all ties together so many of the issues...you do things because boys don’t like you or because the boys don’t want to be with you...the drugs, the cutting, the feeling bad about your weight or being the ugly friend. You could make a really big spider web around the whole thing with boys (exit interview, 5/10/07).

Summary

In summary, girls perceived Book Group to be a “space” separate from other areas of their lives, especially schooled spaces. Book Group offered girls a chance to
have fun, be social, meet with other girls, and of course as Desiree jokingly put it, “to eat lots of good food you brought us!” Our social times together were marked by a time of warmth and comfort in each other’s presence, as well as much laughter and conversation. Our more formal Book Group discussions were also a powerful space for talk, discussion, thoughtful reflection and the sharing of confidences. Girls found Book Group to be a space where their voices were heard and acknowledged, a powerful and important thing to them. They also found a “warm, safe space” together in Book Group, a place they felt comfortable sharing confidences and personal struggles and doubts that they would not have shared in other settings. This Book Group, although it met as an extra-curricular activity at the high school was considered to be an “unschooled space” for the girls, separate from their usual literacy experiences in school. The girls described the Book Group in opposition to their usual schooled literacy experiences; schooled spaces were not “natural” literacy experiences the way Book Group was. Book Group gave them choices, autonomy, and trusted their abilities as readers. School reading was limited, teacher-driven and involved activities and assignment the girls disliked and many times actively resisted. Finally, the girls described the Book Group as a “girls only” space that was separate from boys, which they believed led to the safeness of the group and their ability to share openly; girls reported that they would not have joined a Book Group that was co-educational, for fear that the presence of boys would hamper their ability to share openly, as well as constrain their reading choices.

The girls’ descriptions of their experiences in Book Group reflect and reinforce many of my own experiences and concerns over a decade of teaching English and language arts at the high school level. Due to constraints placed upon me by district
curriculum, mandated standardized testing and administrative and departmental directives, I had limited opportunities to allow students choices in what they read in my classroom; I was often required to test from a mandated list of titles. In one school I taught at I was instructed not to use any literature at all for the entire first semester, but rather to spend the entire 18 weeks teaching grammar, punctuation and vocabulary. Participants reported that Book Group was a departure from their usual schooled experiences with books and literary discussion; this did not surprise me, as I had taught in this school’s English department. I knew that I was one of the few language arts teachers at the school who incorporated literature circles and other student-centered methods of literary response. I initially designed this study to take place outside of the school day because I knew that the required curriculum and the mandated book list in most high schools would not offer opportunities to conduct such a study. Current practices in the majority of high school English classrooms do not include literature based discussions, much less the incorporation of students’ choices to read young adult literature.

Additionally, many of the teachers I worked with actively avoided teaching literature that dealt with issues of the body or issues that the participants in this study listead as important concerns to them as adolescent girls. When I taught the young adult novel *Speak* (Anderson, 2001) which discusses the aftermath of a date rape to a class of high school sophomores, a colleague of mine was mortified, saying that she didn’t like to talk about “those kind of things” with her students. Other teachers I worked with said that they wouldn’t teach the novel because it was a “girls’ book” and boys in their class wouldn’t read it because of this. No wonder girls in Book Group reported that they felt that they never read about issues important to them in their language arts classrooms.
The girls’ descriptions of the powerful space they found in Book Group and the way that they contrasted their experiences there with the literature instruction they receive in English classrooms is telling. Their experiences and the positive reactions they had to the practices and pedagogy of Book Group reflect my beliefs that language arts curriculum needs to offer ways for adolescents to respond to literature in ways that students find more “natural” than dittos, vocabulary quizzes and text annotations; students need opportunities to respond in discussion and with choices. The girls in this study describe their desire to “hear and be heard” in small groups environments; literature circles are one method of incorporating similar aspects of Book Group into language arts classrooms. Additionally, curriculum needs to not shy away from topics that are of importance to adolescent readers; topics such as the body issues explored in Book Group can and should be incorporated into classroom literary readings as well.

In the next section of the paper, I examine how girls’ experiences and responses in the literature based discussion of Book Group reflected aspects of the girls’ personal identities as both readers and as young women. Data analysis for this theme used data sources including participants’ introductory questionnaires, their identity artifacts, transcription of Book Group discussions and one-on-one exit interviews with each of the girls.

Question Two: How do literature based discussion groups reveal adolescent girls’ understandings of their own complex identities as gendered readers?

Although the nine participants in the study described many facets of themselves
and their identities in Book Group, for question two, I grouped the identified themes that emerged from domain analysis and The Listening Guide around seven main themes. All of these themes tied into either gender or literacy—as the question asks for girls’ narrated sense of identity as “gendered readers.” Some themes do not directly tie to gender, for example the theme of “friendship,” however the discourse that girls developed underneath the domain of being a friend did directly tie into gendered issues, such as girls abandoning their friends when they started dating or seeing boys.

As the themes identified under question two are a large set, I created Table Five as a visual tool to help delineate the themes that will be discussed in this section as well as sample quotes from the participants’ interviews and Book Group discussions to illustrate sample comments that would fall under each theme or domain. These are my interpretations of how girls’ discussions in Book Group illustrated ways of “being”; these are the major themes identified as ways I read their understandings of “being a girl” or “being a reader.” Although I used girls’ own words and in particular their “I statements” as coded from The Listening Guide analysis, their statements and voiced experiences are still filtered and interpreted through my readings as a teacher and a researcher. These larger cultural themes I identified within girls’ discussions often encompass several different topics; for example, under the theme of “Body Issues” I included descriptions of girls’ sexuality, their body image, weight issues, and discussions regarding physical appearance over all. I have devoted space to each individual theme and a discussion of how I interpreted girls as using these themes as ways of marking their identities.

Examining girls’ identities as gendered readers has important implications for girls’ literacy studies, English and language arts instruction, and curriculum and
pedagogy overall. Readers' personal identities are integrally connected to their readings of literature and other texts; they impact students “ways of knowing” not only the literature they read, but the larger social world in which their readings are situated (Rosenblatt, 2005; Short, 1999). Literacy practices are integrally tied to notions of identity, including gendered identity (Gee, 1999).

Table 5: Themes for Question Two, Gendered Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>• “I hate how once every one starts getting boyfriends, they forget that you really still need your friends” (Bethany, <em>Dreamland</em>, 3/22/07).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Issues</td>
<td>• “Yeah, that part is sad to me because her fat friend is like the same size I am” (Sydney, <em>Life in the Fat Lane</em>, 4/19/07).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Troubles</td>
<td>• “I mean, I think the first time I tried to commit suicide I was in fifth grade” (Sydney, <em>Cut</em>, 3/15/07).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>• “I mean I went through junior high middle school really trying to keep to myself, because I felt like the freak at the freak show. That’s how I described it to people when I was in eighth grade and like it’s hard to realize” (Sydney, <em>Cut</em>, 3/15/07).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for Others</td>
<td>• “I was thinking I have a brother and you know how she talks about thinking that what happens with her brother is her fault? And I think when we think something is our fault then sometimes we’re really hard on ourselves and most people want to punish themselves some how. Or you feel bad and don’t like who you are so then maybe you hurt yourself” (Carolina, <em>Cut</em>, 3/22/07).</td>
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<td>• “See with my little sister, I look at her and I want her to be protected from all those things. And I also realize that she needs me and she looks up to me and she cared about me and I have to be more together for her” (Tammy, <em>Cut</em>, 3/15/07).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being Nice</td>
<td>• “Yea, but I think girls try a lot. They try to be nicer, or prettier, of whatever they think boys want” (Jamie, <em>Dreamland</em>, 3/22/07).</td>
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**Being a Reader**

All of the participants in the Book Group self-identified as “readers.” They each reported reading on a daily basis; most said they spent between one to two hours per night reading, sometimes for enjoyment and often for school-related assignments. Several of the girls bemoaned the fact that their school assignments and reading for their courses kept them from doing as much “fun” reading as they had done in elementary and junior high school. None of the participants felt they had as much opportunity to read now as they had in junior high. Still, many of the girls in the group were avid readers and they all reported enjoying reading.

A few girls mentioned in their exit interviews that Book Group had helped reawaken their pleasure in reading—that having the chance to read books they chose and wanted to read had made them want to read more in the future. During the last regular Book Group, we spent over 20 minutes at the end of the meeting talking about favorite books and recommending books to other group members to read over the summer months. I, along with several of the girls, left that final Book Group discussion with a long “to read” list jotted down for future reference.

In their individual interviews, the girls defined what a reader is to them. Unanimously, girls said that a reader is someone who enjoys the process of reading and would often choose to read over other pastimes such as watching television, playing on the computer, or talking on the phone. They said they were readers because they chose to spend their spare time reading—not just reading for school assignments or for factual purposes; readers read for enjoyment and pleasure. Many of the girls contrasted their identities as readers with peers who were not readers—other students in their classes who...
attempted to avoid reading or who hated reading. They discussed how non-readers will do anything to avoid reading, like “cheating by using Cliff Notes” (Felicity, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Girls described their identities as readers primarily in connection to the reading they did for non-schooled purposes. They read for “fun,” “enjoyment,” “pleasure,” “to be entertained,” etc. Readers “like to have their nose in a book,” (Sydney, exit interview, 5/10/07). They enjoyed reading young adult novels in their private time as well as current popular classics. They liked books about girls, relationships, and people dealing with problems—primarily contemporary realistic fiction, the sort of books we chose to read together during Book Group. Other girls said they also liked romances, horror novels, fantasy, and teen magazines for fun reading.

Most of the girls spoke with a firm conviction and confidence in their own abilities as readers. Tammy was a notable exception who, although one of the most avid and thoughtful readers of the group, began to question her own status as a reader this year in her English II honors class.

Ms. C has gotten me so confused about what I think about that. Cause she will see these deep symbols throughout the whole book and I’m like, how do you see those? Do you like have some magical power that can spot these things? It really confuses me (Tammy, exit interview, 5/9/07).

This teacher was the majority of the girls’ language arts teacher during the time of the Book Group—the same teacher who assigned the endless annotation assignments the girls complained about, often quite bitterly, during social times before Book Group.
When I asked Tammy if she thought seeing symbols and literary elements is what made someone a “reader,” she backtracked and said,

Like just because you’re better at finding stuff doesn’t mean you’re more of a reader than this person. I would just say that someone who’s not a reader is someone who doesn’t like to read and someone who is a reader and just read a book and loved it. Like I never read a novel until I think it was *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* and I finished it in a day. And it was in the fourth grade and it was a novel and it was probably like a 100 pages, which is barely a novel, but I finished it in like one day and I loved it and that was like the first novel I read and that’s what got me started (Tammy, exit interview, 5/9/07).

An interesting issue that emerged in the girls’ talk about books in their exit interviews as well as their attitudes, discussion, and reactions in actual Book Group was their connections and ties to the physical entity of books. On our first meeting when I book talked the choices for our reading, I had ordered several new copies of the novels so that girls could see the covers and read the dust jackets of the books. Several of the girls became visibly excited by the prospect of the books themselves, asking if “we were going to be getting new books like these?” (Desiree, 3/08/07). In fact, the girls did get new books—all of the books we read in Book Group together were ordered specifically for the weekly discussions and/or were new sets of books that I hadn’t previously shared with students. The girls expressed several times that they loved “being the first to read a book” (Tammy, 3/29/07). Most of them complained that they never received new books to read in school—the books in school were “always tattered and old. I don’t know why,
but it's just more fun to read a new book” (Bethany, 3/29/07). Felicity laughingly admitted that she and the other girls were “fawning over the newness of the books” (Felicity, exit interview, 5/9/07).

The girls discussed their love of the physical nature of books—the crispness of the pages, the smoothness of a cover, the weight of a hardcover book. All of the books we read together were either new trade paper backs or hardcover books except for Life in the Fat Lane, which was delivered in a smaller, mass market paperback size. The girls commented on the printing and cover quality of the book—they didn’t think it was as nicely crafted or bound as the previous books had been. They expressed disappointment in this. “Gosh, these just aren’t as nice of books as Dreamland or the others were, are they?” (Carolina, 4/19/07).

The girls identified themselves as what I began to think of as “book people.” They appreciated the actual books themselves, as well as the stories they contained. Sydney, Desiree, and Felicity all eventually bought their own copies of a few of the books that we read together as a group, even though I had provided copies to the girls to read to eliminate any expense on their part. Sydney said how she “was like a lending library for her friends” and Desiree said, “I just like to own my own copies.” Felicity talked about how her mother wished she’d use the school or public library more, but said that she would rather spend all her free money on books.

I mean my mom is mad at me because I went to the grocery store because I needed more books to read and I bought like five books. She’s like you need money for this and money for that. I’m like, but can’t we save money for books? I mean I guess I can go to the library, but I’d rather buy them. Because if you
really like the book, you have it. And you don’t have to try to remember the book and go searching for it again and it's checked out (Felicity, exit interview, 5/9/07).

This emphasis on being “book people” was reinforced to me by the lack of enthusiasm or response to the online “blog” portion of the study. Less than half of the girls ever accessed the online blog, even though they all had home Internet access and could also easily reach the blog from school computers as well. Those who did access the blog posted only once or twice, often in short one to two sentence posts. For example, Jamie posted in response to Dreamland, a book she enthusiastically and verbosely responded to in Book Group by only a one line sentence on the blog, “Gosh, I really feel so bad for Caitlin and I wonder why her boyfriend is so mean?” (blog, 3/18/07).

I asked the girls about the blog and online reading in their individual exit interviews. All of the girls said they preferred not to read in an online or electronic environment and most said they spent less than 30 minutes online per day. Those who did use the Internet on a daily basis did so mainly to check email or the popular website My Space. As Felicity said, “I don’t really like to read online. I like to have a book in my hands. It’s not the same to do things online. I don’t like the computer; I want to lay down on my bed and read and curl up with that book” (exit interview, 5/9/07). Carolina also said she was not a “computer person,” commenting that:

I only went to the blog once. I’m not really a computer person. If I’m online, it’s really just on My Space and when we have to do an assignment in class, I really like to write it, not necessarily type it. I’m not really a computer person I guess. I still like paper and books (Carolina, exit interview, 5/9/07).
Sydney also said she was a book, not a computer person.

Online stuff is not very important to me compared to books. I spend about five minutes in the morning sometimes catching up on my email and I'm a sucker for horoscopes, so I read that online. But that's about it. If I had a choice I'd definitely rather have a book than anything online (Sydney, exit interview, 5/10/07).

Discussions during Book Group also often revealed interesting information about the girls’ reading habits and preferences. Frequently, conversations included knowledge of books and authors and techniques that revealed “literary talk” about book structure, characters, and literary elements. The girls often compared books we read to other texts, connected characters to other characters they’d previously read, and frequently discussed the actual style of the writing of the novels. Some sample conversations from Book Group about the book, *Sold*, which was written in short, poetic vignettes (*Sold*, 4/12/07):

Carolina: I just really liked it and I thought it was so easy to read and like you just wanted to keep reading. And you just really got involved with her and wanted things to be better. It seemed like it should be harder to read since it was about such a horrible topic.

Sydney: Yeah, I really liked how it was written.

Desiree: It was like it gave you a break.

Sydney: The format made it read quickly, it was really fast paced with the short entries and I think it encouraged you to keep reading more. And you got a break from the plain old side to side style of writing.

The girls also discussed their reading habits and the joy of discovery that reading provided for them. One day the girls were talking about the upcoming release of the final book in the Harry Potter series. One of the girls shared that her friend always read the
endings of the books first. The girls in the group found this type of reading practice as
Sydney put it, "offensive to me as a reader" (Dreamland, 3/29/07).

   Sydney: I think if I read the ending it would ruin the book for me. I know some books are slow in the beginning, but I want to give them a chance.

   Ms. L: And part of it's about the anticipation, right?

   Desiree: I usually do figure out books halfway through though unless they're really, really good. I'm like this is going to happen and then it happens. So if that doesn't happen, it's a really good book.

   Tammy: And then it's over and you're like damn it's over, now that's a good book.

   Ms. L: Do you ever quit then, if you're like this isn't going to get good?


   Tammy: What book did you quit?


   Tammy: Me neither. Ooh, but I friggin' love The Great Gatsby, I love that book!

   Desiree: I love that book too.

   Tammy: It really is so great.

   Although this study sought to look at girls' identities as readers as well as their
gendered identities as adolescent girls, there was also some overlap between these two areas. As female adolescent readers, the girls described a desire to read about as Jamie put it "girl stuff" and "the issues girls go through" (Jamie, reading questionnaire). She said she wanted to read about these things in Book Group because "nobody else talks about it and you don't read about it in school" (Jamie, exit interview, 5/9/07). Maria too wanted to read more books about "girls who deal with their boyfriends and other girl
problems like how you look” (Maria, reading questionnaire). Carolina also said her favorite books dealt with “girl problems” such as “love, weight problems, feeling lonely, boyfriends” (Carolina, reading questionnaire). The girls felt that they seldom had opportunities in school to read about girls, or problems girls commonly dealt with. In the books they cited as required reading for their language arts classes, the protagonists were primarily male and the books were not contemporary realistic fiction, the genre they felt had the most to say about girls and their problems. They felt that only on their own, in their fun reading, did they get chances to read books that directly spoke to them as adolescent girls. Book Group then was a space where they had a chance to read these books about girls, girl problems, in concert with other girls and perhaps more importantly—girls who self identified as readers.

Gendered Identities

An additional layer of analysis for the study looked at ways in which Book Group discussions and other methods of data collection revealed aspects of girls’ own sense of their identities as female adolescents. Using domain and taxonomic analysis, major cultural themes were identified under the topic of “what it is to be a girl” in the voices and experiences of the participants. These cultural themes were broadly grouped around major topics revealed through girls’ discussions of their own sense of being and identity. Using The Listening Guide’s (Brown, 1998; Taylor et al, 1995) interpretive framework of data analysis, I created folders for each of the girls containing lists of the “I statements” girls made about themselves. These were then coded for domain and taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1980) to develop the themes. Again, although transcription of girls’ own
words and discussions were used for analysis, these are my interpretations of the girls’ voices and stories; these were my readings of girls’ sense of gendered identity as revealed through Book Group discussions. As identities are fluid and changing, the context of the study including the makeup of the Book Group, the particular participants, and the books chosen for actual discussions all affect the data collected. A different facilitator, different fellow participants, and different novels all might have produced different voices and narrated identities.

**Friendship**

Book Group participants discussed how friendships continued to be important to them, but many felt they struggled to keep friends in high school, especially as boyfriends and dating became a part of their lives. Girls described a conflicted sense of where their loyalties should lie—should they devote themselves primarily to their friendships or to their boyfriends. Girls who didn’t yet have boyfriends reported that they felt less important to their friends and a sense of emptiness without having a boyfriend. Many felt conflicted about what they could do and say to their friends; their notion of what it was to “be a friend” was often tested by issues related to boys. Carolina explains how she felt less able to openly share with her best friends once they had boyfriends, during a discussion of the novel, *Dreamland* (3/29/07), which also deals with friendships and boyfriends.

Carolina: I don’t know, it doesn’t really matter how close you are, I mean once they fall in love. Or even if they don’t fall in love but they’re just doing bad stuff and you know about it, and they may say they’re not going to do it again, but they do and then it affects your friendship that you said something.

Melissa: So then sometimes you’re afraid, so should I even say anything? I know what you mean.
Carolina: And yeah, then they think it's none of your business.

Carolina expressed that her definition of friendship and being a friend involved telling hard truths to her friends, even when they may not want to hear them. Of all the girls, Carolina insisted that she would intervene if she felt her friend were truly in trouble, although acknowledging that her friends might not always appreciate it. During our second discussion of Cut, Carolina was angered that some of the girls said that they knew plenty of people who cut but that there was no point in intervening. She protested saying, “And I think if we know someone who is doing it, we should care and we should be scared for them and we should try to help” (Cut, 3/22/07). At the same time, she acknowledged that even though she tried to be a “good friend” and “help” others, that many times it was difficult or impossible to be a truly good friend as she defined one.

The participants acknowledged that friendships often involved silences, rather than girls fighting to help one another. In fact, girls said they often silenced their opinions about their friends’ dangerous behaviors or damaging relationships in order to preserve the friendship. This theme came up repeatedly during our discussions of the novels Cut and Dreamland. These books featured female characters in desperate trouble—one who self mutilates to the point where she must be in a psychiatric facility and another who has a boyfriend who physically and emotionally abuses her. Neither of these characters have friends who step in to help them or who attempt to intervene, until the ending pages of the novels. The girls in Book Group found this realistic, saying that they often faced similar situations with their own friends, but avoided intervening as they feared that their friends would choose the dangerous behavior or the delinquent boyfriend over the friendship. In a conversation about Dreamland (3/29/07):
Sydney: Yeah, but I don’t know if she would have even cared, because I mean none of her friends like him, all of the cheerleaders talk about him, and they want to kick her off the squad and she’s willing to lose her friends to be with him.

Carolina: Yeah, even if she knew, I think she would have thought, oh it will be different with me. I don’t see anything like that in him. You’re blind like that when you’re in love. You don’t realize how they are or you just don’t want to see it. Even when it’s like right there.

Ms. L: I always thought too, like the other girls, they get mad at her and they kick her off the cheerleading team, and all of that, but it’s not like, I don’t know... I would want to think they would try to intervene, like if this was happening with your friend that was so obviously out of control, like, I’m trying to think, does anyone in the book tell her they’re worried about her?

Desiree: I think Rina tries to talk to her and tell her...

Carolina: It’s hard because as a friend, it’s so hard to try to be there when that person doesn’t want you. She didn’t really open up to her, she didn’t really even tell her anything.

Sydney: Yeah, they just protect their boyfriend or their bad choices and then you become the bad person for bringing it up. You’re better off just not saying anything.

Jamie’s relationship with her boyfriend was a source of stress within Book Group and within her friendship with two of the group members—Carolina and Maria. Carolina especially was angered by Jamie’s relationship with her boyfriend and clearly stated how much she didn’t like him and that she thought he was unhealthy for Jamie. Carolina also described to me one day after Book Group how much her friendship with Jamie had suffered over the past year that she had been dating this current boyfriend. An exchange during a Book Group discussion of Dreamland illustrates the tension that existed between the girls, as well as the inner conflicts Jamie herself was struggling with (Dreamland, 3/29/07).

Jamie: I think it’s hard though to have a friend who has a boyfriend who is controlling.
Carolina: I know! (Carolina rolls her eyes at Jamie.)

Jamie: I know, my boyfriend is like that. And he's always like you need to be with me, and I'm like excuse you.

Carolina: Yeah, Jamie.

Jamie: I mean and then I still go out with him, because I feel bad and then I never end up seeing my girlfriends. Like all my friends that I had last year and I feel really mixed up, because I want to hang out with them, talk to them, and this is like, I try to tell him to go hang out with his friends so that I can have some time with my friends and he won't. I mean if he goes out with his friends he wants me to come. I mean I need my friends...

Ms. L: I mean I think you never stop needing your girlfriends.

Desiree: My best girl friends are gay guys.

Ms. L: Yeah, I have a few of those too. And even a friend, it can be a guy friend...

Sydney: Yeah, like my best friend is always with her boyfriend and his friends, yeah that's great because she says well you can come, but you miss just hanging out with your friends.

Jamie: You go through a lot of things with your friends...

Ms. L: I mean hopefully some of your friends are going to be your friends forever, I mean I still have a couple of friends from high school...I mean I have friends from junior high. And I have no idea where my junior high boyfriends or any of my boyfriends from high school are...so I think that's something to consider.

(Laughter)

Bethany: And Caitlin totally loses that, she loses Rina, she's always with the boyfriend.

Jamie: Yeah, I miss my friends and I think about them and then he just makes me feel so bad, he acts like he just needs me to be with him...

During our time together, Jamie never did articulate that she had found peace with her conflicts over her dueling identities as a friend and as a girlfriend. Her boyfriend continued to make demands upon her time, and often pressed her to skip Book Group or
to leave early—he often sent her text messages during our meetings, called her phone repeatedly (over 10 times during one meeting), and even came by the room we met in once to try to interrupt. (Jamie told him to go away, but looked visibly distressed by the disruption.) Still, Jamie did resist his attempts to interrupt her time with the other girls in Book Group and declared in her exit interview that she “needed that space. That time to be with the other girls. I think it was the only time I knew I was going to see my friends and not have him be there. I need to figure out more ways to do that” (Jamie, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Body Issues

As a once adolescent girl and as the former teacher of adolescent girls, I was not surprised to hear “body talk” as an important focus of our time together. And more obviously, the initial design for this study centered around the reading and discussion of books that dealt with issues of the body common to adolescent girls. This “body talk” pervaded every aspect of our time together though—girls discussed issues of the body on their introductory questionnaires, in our informal social time together, in Book Group discussions, and in the times when they lingered after Book Group meetings to chat with me.

Underneath the broader theme of “Body Issues” I have included issues girls raised about their body image—including issues of weight, physical appearance and beauty, as well as sexuality. Although none of the girls in the Book Group had serious weight problems and many of them were quite thin, they all discussed how they had serious issues with how they looked or their weight. Even those who knew they were thin said they worried that something might happen that would change their ability to stay thin.
The novel, *Life in the Fat Lane* (Bennett, 2000), tells the tale of a high school beauty queen who starts out impossibly thin and pretty. Over the course of the novel, she contracts a disease that makes her gain weight uncontrollably and she must learn how to deal with a new identity that is not pageant queen or pretty girl. The participants in the Book Group often disliked the main character, Lara, saying she was obsessed with looks and appearance, yet much of their talk echoed this concern with weight and prettiness.

Bethany: I just got so shocked by how much weight she gains and how fast...like I’m at the part where she weighs 208.

Tammy: And yeah, she weighs 118 at the beginning.

Desiree: I was like reading it and I’m like, she’s not losing weight, when is she going to lose some weight? I didn’t find her to be that bad though. I mean she does say some really annoying stuff, but I don’t think she does it purposely to be a mean person. I mean her best friend is not someone who is a perfect body.

Sydney: Yeah, that part is sad to me, because her “fat friend” is like the same size I am.

Desiree: Yeah, I found that part depressing too.

Melissa: Yeah, and Lara is used to being what, like a size 4?

Sydney: I wish I was a size 4.

Jamie: Yeah, me too.

Desiree: Sometimes I don’t care, but I don’t know, reading this then I started to think about it.

Ms. L: Yeah, I think that’s normal. I mean I was reading it going okay, here I am reading this book about weight while I’m eight months pregnant. I mean how can you not have reactions to it? I mean I think there’s very few girls who don’t have some kind of...

Sydney: Problem with their bodies, right?

Maria: Yeah, I mean either you think you’re too skinny or you’re too short or this part of you is too big, or...
Desiree: Yeah, that’s why I really liked this book, because I think it’s something we can all relate to, I mean even though we’re not all jumping 100 lbs or so in our weight, I mean almost everyone, even if you’re like gorgeous, everyone has problems with their body or their personal experience or what they look like.

Tammy: It’s like when you asked us what problems teen girls are most worried about, I really do think it’s weight and your body.

Ms. L: Oh yeah, every single one of you wrote down weight. Or your body or the way you look. Every single one of you put something about the way you look…

Even though the girls passionately described how much they didn’t like the character of Lara in the book or her preoccupation with weight and appearances, the girls also admitted how much they wanted to be like her, at least physically. They wanted to be that size 4 that Lara was; they wanted to weigh 118 pounds like she does at the beginning of the novel. Maria described in her exit interview how reading the book had actually scared her in a way; she admitted that she usually could eat whatever she wanted and not gain weight, but now she worried that maybe something could happen to change that. Maybe she too could gain weight uncontrollably. “And then how she started gaining weight, it made me worry. What if I started gaining weight and I got fat? And since then I’ve been all worried about my weight” (Maria, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Carolina, also a very thin girl said that although she didn’t have a problem with her weight, reading the book made her realize how important being thin was to her. “Gaining weight would be really hard for me, yeah. I guess when I was reading it, I realized how much I really do care about that, about gaining weight” (Carolina, exit interview, 5/9/07). Carolina also said she realized that being thin was so important to her that she’d been rude to other girls, suggesting they lose weight, thinking she was helping them. (Something that also occurs in the novel.)
Yeah, then also, I think about how when she was being nice to the other girl and trying to tell her how to lose weight, I know I've done that sometimes, so I was thinking, I never thought I was bad. And now I realize how the other person feels, actually feels about that. Like, oh, I wish I hadn't done that (Carolina, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Sydney and Desiree were the most vocal about the issue of weight during the Book Group discussions, and they were the only two girls who were not already very thin. Neither of the girls was extremely overweight and both were quite tall; Desiree was almost six feet tall. The girls discussed several times during social hour how difficult it was to be taller and bigger than their friends. Sydney said she didn't like to go shopping with her friends because she would end up having to shop in a different department as junior sizes didn't fit her right. Desiree seemed more confident in her appearance and size than Sydney, but admitted during our discussions of Life in the Fat Lane that the book's focus on weight issues had started to wear on her (Life in the Fat Lane, 5/03/07).

Sydney: I like it a lot! I read it in one day. I don't know why I liked it, but the one character Molly really reminded me of me. Because the main character was all skinny and the other one was like, I gracefully squeeze into a size 14.

Ms. L: Oh her best friend?

Desiree: Hey, there's nothing wrong with that. I'm a size 12/14.

Ms. L: How did it make you feel right as you were reading some of those things?

Sydney: I wanted to eat! (Laughs.)

Desiree: I was eating while I was reading! And then I wanted another bag of chips!

The girls often described the pressures to be attractive and said that the message that girls should be pretty and beautiful above all else came at them from all arenas—
magazines, television, books, other girls they knew, and definitely from boys. They spoke wistfully and enviously about girls in their school and television and movie stars who they thought were beautiful. During social hour, this was a recurring theme that I recorded in my field notes—the talk about makeup, hair styles, clothing, losing weight, and girls that they saw as examples of beauty. Although they critiqued reality shows such as *America’s Next Top Model* for telling one of the show’s contestants that she was “too heavy” to be a model, the girls then spent the next ten minutes critiquing the physical appearance, body type, and fashion choices of the young women on the show. Clearly, physical appearance was incredibly important to them. I found myself drawn into their talk of makeup, hairstyles, and fashion myself—the energy that surrounded these discussions was contagious. Yet it also seemed to mask important underlying currents of insecurity that the girls felt about their own appearances. As Desiree explained,

Yeah, that’s the reason why every girl wants to be beautiful. Because you think that once you’re beautiful, that everything else will be all right, that it will solve everything. Everything in my life will be right, every guy will want them, everything with my friends and family will be right. Everything. (*Life in the Fat Lane, 5/03/07*).

While the girls were well versed and had great social knowledge about issues related to diet tips, makeup application, and even measuring body fat percentages, their discussions reflected remarkably little knowledge about sexuality and sexual matters. Of the nine girls in the study, four admitted that they had never been kissed. Most were waiting eagerly for this to happen and had built it up to be a monumental event in their
lives. Sydney even said if she could just get kissed before she was sixteen she would be
content to wait years for a serious boyfriend; "All I want is a kiss! Just one kiss! And
then I'll wait until I'm eighteen to date, I swear" (Sydney, *Dreamland*, 3/19/07).

Most of the girls admitted to having limited sexual experiences, and discussed
their status as virgins in Book Group discussions and social hour. Only two girls spoke
of any real sexual experience; one was Maria and she only did so at the end of the study
in her exit interview where she disclosed that she related to the character Caitlin who
loses her virginity to an abusive boyfriend who then "treats her like trash" (Maria, exit
interview, 5/9/07). Maria clearly regretted her sexual experience and had found it to be
damaging to her self-esteem. "Because guys don't care. They don't care how much you
love them. And you can give them everything you have and they still don't care" (Maria,
*Dreamland*, 3/19/07).

Overall, the girls described sex as being something that they thought most high
school girls were too young for, especially girls who were in the earlier grades of high
school. They also thought girls often had sex for the wrong reasons which led to negative
consequences. This came up during their discussion of the book *Dreamland*, when the
main character Caitlin loses her virginity to her abusive boyfriend (*Dreamland*, 3/19/07).

Desiree: When she talks about sex and how she tells herself this is the closest you
can get to another human being, I just think she's so got it wrong, because sex
should be something that happens after you've already gotten that close to
someone else.

Jamie: She thinks it's going to make things better, but it doesn't.

Carolina: Girls always think that it will make things better or make you closer,
and it doesn't. It doesn't make you closer. She thought it would make things
better, that's what girls think about sex.
The girls revealed strong mores about their own sexual behavior. Tammy, who had a serious boyfriend of two years, discussed how frustrated she was with her friends who had sex early in relationships or casually.

Or like, my best friend, when she got a boyfriend she had sex with him after knowing him for only two weeks. I'm like I've been with my boyfriend for two years and I'm still a virgin, what the hell is your problem. It's like, I'm not doing that, you shouldn't be allowed to do that. It angers me. Things like that anger me. Especially now that I've grown up and I know what's right from wrong and what, I have values. I have values (Tammy, exit interview, 5/09/07).

Desiree agreed, stating that while she didn't disagree with premarital sex, she did think that girls in high school and junior high were having sex too early. The girls talked in tones of shock and concern about the number of pregnant girls they saw in the hallways at their school.

Tammy: Well, like in PE, that's where you find out everyone who's pregnant. It's just a class where everyone is pregnant. (We laugh.) It is though, there are like three girls in our PE class who are pregnant.

Ms. L: Are they visibly pregnant?

Tammy: Yes, now they are.

Sydney: There are just a lot of girls at our school who are. Every day I swear I see a new person I didn't know about who is pregnant.

Tammy: It's weird too, because I know one girl and she's like fourteen!

Desiree: ...Yeah, but losing your virginity at fourteen, I just think that's, well...kind of young.

Sydney: Too young.
Desiree: Yeah, I mean I think premarital sex is fine, like even sex in high school is fine, but fourteen?

Tammy: That’s too young!

Although the Book Group participants never identified at what age they thought girls were ready to be sexually active, they clearly thought that they (mainly freshmen and sophomores) were still too young. Again, many of them were waiting just for first kisses and first boyfriends. As Sydney said, “I just want the kiss! Just a kiss!” (Life in the Fat Lane, 4/19/07).

Perhaps considering their lack of sexual experience overall and the fact that many of the girls had limited experience with dating; I should have been less surprised by another theme that developed under the issue of sexuality, and that was the girls’ lack of knowledge about certain topics relating to sex such as sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. Although most of the girls had not yet had sex, they had all either taken or were currently enrolled in a mandatory health class at the high school, during which topics such as human sexuality were included in the curriculum. However, the school district the girls attend does limit the information students are able to hear about issues such as “safe sex” and contraception. The girls often displayed a lack of knowledge and a naiveté about sexual matters, even though they were very well read and often seemed more mature than many of their similarly-aged peers I had taught over the years. Sydney, who said in one interview that she thought she knew more about sex, drugs, and other “risky behaviors” because she’d always had older friends, often displayed her lack of accurate information about sexual matters. During one of our discussions about Dreamland, Sydney and I had the following exchange (Dreamland, 3/22/07).
Sydney: Yeah, he takes her home and she doesn't even know him and then they end up making out in his car forever. I mean what if he had a disease, what if he had gonorrhea or something?

Ms. L: I don't think you can catch gonorrhea from kissing.

Sydney: Still, you never know...

Sydney seemingly wasn't convinced that you couldn't catch gonorrhea from something as simple as kissing; on the film of this interchange she shakes her head at me in disbelief when I offer up the claim that you can't catch gonorrhea from kissing. No one else in Book Group spoke up to support my claim either. Several of the girls looked at me skeptically when I shared this information. Although I agreed with Sydney's claim that making out with a stranger wasn't the safest behavior, I couldn't seem to convince her that it hadn't put the character at risk of catching a sexually transmitted disease. As the school district has quite restrictive rules about what teachers are allowed to share with students about contraception and sexuality, I let the conversation slide and we moved on to another topic, but the moment stuck with me.

I was reminded of mine and Sydney's conversation a few weeks later when the Book Group was discussing the novel Sold, which details the traumas one young woman endures when she is sold into teenaged prostitution in India. The book contains somewhat explicit descriptions of the sexual abuse the main character endures and it left us all shaken as readers. The girls were also shocked by the physical living conditions inside the Indian brothel as well as the lack of hygiene procedures (Sold, 4/12/07).

Sydney: She washes herself on her birthday. And that's just like a sponge bath. I mean even in the brothel, they just kind of wipe themselves afterwards.

Desiree: Ooh, ooh, ooh, that is disgusting when you think about that. Your body
not being washed after all of that.

Sydney: Yeah, they wipe themselves thinking that will help with the disease.

Desiree: I was thinking about that, I mean would that even help prevent the disease? Just wiping themselves afterwards?

Ms. L: Oh no, I mean of course not, but they don’t really have knowledge about STDs or anything like that.

Sydney: Yeah, the doctor comes, but they don’t really understand what any of what he does is or what it’s for.

Ms. L: Oh yeah, that’s right. I remember thinking that as I was reading at first, how does no one get pregnant, but then you find out that the doctor comes and gives them shots of birth control.

Desiree: I didn’t even know that existed.

Ms. L: That what existed?

Desiree: Shots of birth control.

Ms. L: Oh yeah. It does. And then they get shots to keep the sickness away.

Maria: Yeah, what would that be?

Ms. L: Does anyone have an idea? (Silence). Well, it’s probably something like penicillin that could help treat some STDs, but it’s not like it can treat everything. I mean some STDs aren’t curable.

Sydney: Yeah, like that one lady she had that cough and she had to get kicked out. And the other girl got a virus…

Desiree: Yeah, the incurable virus. Which was what, maybe HIV?

Again, in this interchange the girls’ lack of sexual knowledge seemed evident.

The girls question whether wiping one self with a rag could help prevent sexually transmitted diseases. They thought this was unlikely, but they weren’t sure. Desiree was unaware that something like injectible birth control existed; nor did any of the girls seem aware that penicillin or other antibiotics are treatments for many common sexually
transmitted diseases. Yet when I asked the girls if they thought they were fairly knowledgeable about sexual health matters that were important for young women to know, they all said yes. The girls’ sense of their own knowledge often was not indicated in the comments they made in Book Group and I often wondered how much misinformation they carried with them regarding important sexual health issues.

An interesting theme in the data was the girls’ failure to identity “body issues” as being a central theme that tied our readings together even though I had been open about my interest in body issues for adolescent girls and all of the books I initially book talked with the girls focused on issues of the body. In their exit interviews, I asked the girls if they saw any threads or themes that ran through the books that we’d read together. The girls responded that they were about “challenges,” “problems,” and “social issues” common to girls. Other themes mentioned included “troubles with parents,” “things that are common today for girls,” and “things that girls go through and you see a lot today.” The girls mentioned specific topics in the books such as abusive boyfriends, gaining weight, and cutting as some of these social issues that girls struggled with, but none of the girls connected any of these issues specifically to a discussion of the body or their bodies. Yet, every girl in the group had listed “body issues” as the number one problem that girls today deal with on their introductory questionnaires.

Personal Issues

On the surface, these are girls who look like they are anything but at-risk. They are all enrolled in honors and AP courses and are well liked and respected by their teachers. The vast majority of them are honor roll students. They are involved in school activities including theater, choir, dance, orchestra, AVID, French Club, and Graphic
Arts Club. They hold down part-time jobs, they baby sit nieces and nephews, they are genuinely pleasant, polite young women. I had over half of these girls in my language arts class at one point, and although I knew they suffered the normal struggles of adolescence, I would never have considered most of these girls as “troubled.” Yet, as I discussed earlier, Book Group quickly became a place where confidences were shared and troubles were divulged. And many of these girls had been seriously troubled by issues of depression, self loathing, and loneliness.

Their home lives were not supportive for the most part. Three of the girls reported that their fathers had all but abandoned them for new families when they remarried. Only three of the girls still had fathers that lived in their home. Desiree had never known her father at all. Jamie was the only girl who reported a warm and close relationship with both of her parents. Bethany described “basically raising myself” after her parents divorced; her father spent most of his free time with his new girlfriend and was seldom home. Sydney said her parents “didn’t want to deal with (her) problems, so they just pretended they didn’t exist.” The girls had turned to various methods for coping with their feelings of loneliness and the lack of support systems they saw at home.

Several of the girls divulged that they had been troubled and struggled with self mutilation in the past. Tammy was the first to divulge this information in Book Group:

Well, okay, I had an issue with it for like a long time. And I'm, I'm, I guess you would say I'm a cutter who's stopped. And I kept it from my parents for a long, amazingly long time. They didn't find out until one day they walked in on me and I ended up going to therapy. Therapy didn't help at all. And for me to stop it, it was a totally personal thing. I mean, my entire life up until then, it wasn't terrible,
but it was rough, it was rough. And like, a lot of social issues were going on because of middle school. Middle school was absolutely horrible for me, I mean school, and people would not accept you, and people were so immature and friends were not friends. And it was just horrible and to stop I had to stop and think about what I really wanted to be doing with my life and cutting wasn't getting me anywhere. So, the last time I did it was probably a while ago, like over the summer. But my boyfriend, Damian, he was kind of the key person to help me out, because he was someone who really cared and wanted me to stop for me. My mom, she worked too much to care, my dad doesn't live with me and I didn't even really want him to care, you know. But Damian really caring about me helped me out, and we're going out, but even if we broke up, we're basically just really good friends and having someone there like that to care about me, who would stay by my side no matter what, really helped me. And I can talk about it now without thinking, "Oh my God" or wanting to cry about it and that's a really big step. It's difficult subject matter, when you read this book and it's hard to relate to if you don't have personal experience. I mean you have your brother. But for me, this book was so personal...it was oh so personal. I mean, I wasn't like Cally, I knew, I knew why I cut (Tammy, Cut, 3/15/07).

Although I was shocked to hear Tammy describe her struggles with self-mutilation and the loneliness she felt at home, none of the other girls in Book Group looked shocked. They all said they knew someone who cut and Desiree said, "Oh, I know multiple, multiple people who do it" (Cut, 3/15/07). Three other girls in the group also admitted that they had used cutting in the past as a way to deal with issues of pain.
and loneliness. Four girls discussed having to go to professional or school counseling at some point to deal with the seriousness of their issues. Sydney describes how hard it was for her to be referred for counseling after she was self harming and suicidal:

I think that a lot of people didn't want to know about it either, because they didn't know how to deal with it. Like they wanted to look the other way. Because like with my own personal experience, my parents they knew I had problems like a long time ago, but they just kept trying to turn the other cheek. I mean I think the first time I tried to commit suicide I was in the fifth grade, so that's kind of scary to go through in fifth grade. And I was the only fifth grader in my class who had to go to the counselor, the school counselor every week, and like, your parents get called and they get told. But they don't talk to you about it and they don't acknowledge it, then they get called out of work so I guess they have to acknowledge it. I guess now people have to acknowledge it (Sydney, Cut, 3/15/07).

All of the girls in the group described feelings of low self-esteem, some more pronounced than others; many of the girls said they were attempting to change their perceptions of themselves and realize they were as Bethany said, “worth more than that” (Bethany, exit interview, 5/10/07). Bethany, Carolina, Maria and Jamie all said that they had entered into either emotionally or physically abusive relationships with boys that they had struggled to leave due to their low self esteem. Maria and Bethany felt that their desire for boys to care about them had led to making decisions about sex that they now regretted. All of these girls discussed their personal connection to the novel Dreamland in their exit interviews, which deals with a girl who stays in a relationship with an
abusive boyfriend and attempts to use sex as a way of hoping her boyfriend will stop
abusing her.

What happened to, what's her name, Caitlin, with her boyfriend, that like
happened to me. When she slept with him, she expected them to get closer and
instead he treats her like a piece of trash. I thought that was really realistic...she
thought it was going to solve things and it didn't. It doesn't, that's realistic, that
happened to me (Maria, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Yeah, I would say Dreamland for me. Because the boyfriend issue and I guess
we all, well I guess not everyone, but I guess not everyone gets the bad
boyfriends. Some people get lucky I guess (Carolina, exit interview, 5/9/07).

A relationship that I was in wasn't really that abusive, but I was in an abusive
relationship, probably of all my relationships, all of them except for the one I'm in
now have involved abuse in some kind of a way...you know mentally, sometimes
physically and all of that stuff and sometimes it's hard. Sometimes it's hard to get
over that. But you know, I do move on, but then I know it will never go away.
You know it's hard. I mean I really related to that book, even though it wasn't as
harsh as the book where if I didn't get there at a certain time he'd beat me, it
wasn't like that. But it was one of those. I didn't have a Rogerson, but I had
someone where I could see some of that. Like you know, after reading that, I'm
so aware of that, with my boyfriend. If I catch a warning sign, the relationship is over (Bethany, exit interview, 5/10/07).

The Junior High Years

Bethany's sentiments about trying to change her patterns of accepting abusive behavior seemed common with the girls. Even though they revealed feelings of loneliness, low self esteem, or struggling for a sense of belonging, many felt that they were doing better than they had in the past about dealing with their emotions in a more constructive manner. They felt that high school offered them more chances to find a place to belong. However, the experience of junior high was so negative for the girls and was mentioned so often during Book Group discussions (the issues of junior high as a horrible time and place for the girls came up at least once in every Book Group meeting) that I have included it as a cultural theme of its own. Junior high and the experiences girls had there clearly affected their sense of identity, although they often reported trying to work against the identities they had either created or they felt had been created for them during these junior high years.

Below is an example of one of our early conversations about the junior high experience. After girls had brought up junior high several times, I finally asked them what it was about junior high that seemed to still haunt them. We had the following exchange, which also highlights some of the other important identity themes discussed in this section of the paper.

Ms. L: What do you think it is about junior high for girls?

Tammy: You just want to be older, you want to fit in, there's so much pressure.

Jamie: And boys in junior high are so mean and you think it's all about how you look.
Sydney: It's like the transition, from elementary school where everyone had to get along more. It was more supervised. And now you're starting to go through things you've never experienced and your hormones are like wow.

Desiree: I hated junior high.

Felicity: It was the worst.

Ms. L: Yeah, I'm 34 and I would still say junior high were the worst three years of my life.

Tammy: Yeah, my mom says the same thing.

Desiree: Things are so much better in high school.

Jamie: Guys don't help, guys don't help at all. You always have to be pretty, you have to be skinny, and you think you need to diet, and guys tell you things.

Tammy: And they make you feel bad.

Jamie: My sixth grade year and my seventh grade year were like the worst. By eighth grade I wouldn't listen as much, but it was like hard, I had to change how I looked at myself.

Melissa: I hated junior high.

Sydney: In junior high, I think all the voices you hear are the ones who say hurtful things and who tell you you can't be something or you have to be a certain way and you haven't learned to tune any of those voices out. And the guys don't help, I agree.

Ms. L: I mean, but the girls don't help either, do they? I mean I see girls be so mean to each other.

Jamie: Oh yeah, in junior high, your friends aren't really friends, because again it's competition over boys. Or like they tell you you look good when you don't.

Tammy: Or they want you to be their ugly friend.

Sydney: I didn't even want to go shopping with my friends, because I'd be shopping in a totally different section than them.

Jamie: Yeah, that hurts.

Ms. L: Yeah, it makes me wonder what we can do for junior high girls, because
it's not like you step into high school and it's magically gone.

Desiree: No way.

Felicity: Yeah, it doesn't go away, you carry it with you.

Desiree: I don't know, my issues didn't magically disappear, I mean junior high was unbelievably horrible for me, as we discussed earlier, but then when I got to high school I had people who liked me, and I had friends, but then when I got to sophomore year, a lot of the issues came back to me. And I think I just started to get over them. So maybe stuff doesn't go away but we learn new ways to deal with it I guess.

Sydney: I mean, I think that is why being shy is so hard, I mean it's really hard for me to talk to people and I get red. That's why I'm shocked that I can talk here. I mean I went through middle school really trying to keep to myself, because I felt like the freak at the freak show. That's how I described it to people when I was in eighth grade and like it's hard to realize. I think at high school, there are more people and different people to get to be friends with.

This conversation about the experience of being a girl in junior high reveals an overlapping of many of the themes already discussed regarding the girls' narrations about the forces that continue to shape their sense of identities. Junior high is a time where they felt they lost friendships and had false friends. Friends shifted from being a source of support to a form of competition—as boys became more important to girls in junior high, suddenly girls felt they were competing with and against their friends for boys' attention and as to who could be prettier and more attractive. Issues with boys also reinforced girls' sense of struggle over their body image and physical appearance—boys told them they needed to lose weight or they simply believed they needed to lose weight or be prettier to attract boys. Girls struggled to shut these negative voices and forces out, but many of them failed to find their own sense of self worth separate from the pressures of junior high.
Only in high school were they now beginning to recover from these years of self
doubt and struggle. Sydney’s description of feeling like “the freak at the freak show”
was especially poignant and echoed her descriptions of herself in her body biography,
where she said, “I drew a mask just because I think that shows how I’m always trying to
hide my vulnerability…and the little sweat marks show that I get nervous really easily,
from pretty much anything…and the top hat and cane, because I’m always putting a show
on to meet other people’s standards” (Sydney, Identity Artifact, 3/8/07).

Responsibility for Others

Another important theme related to the girls’ sense of their own identities was the
theme of being responsible for others—whether these responsibilities were within their
families, their friendships, or their romantic relationships, all of the girls in the study
reported care-giving roles in their lives. Girls described taking care of others in ways that
often seemed clearly maternal to me. Many of the girls in the study were either expected
to be responsible for siblings in the family or had self-appointed themselves as
responsible for siblings. Sydney, who was actually the younger child in her family,
described being expected to take care of her older brother. Many of the girls who had
brothers said that boys in their family weren’t expected to have the same roles that girls
were; many of the girls seemed to accept this as natural and didn’t question the care-
giving roles that they were supposed to take on in their families. While reading Sold,
which described the role of women in a small village in Nepal, the girls were aghast at
the way girls were treated in the family. Yet, their own conversations revealed that girls
and boys definitely played different roles in their own families as well (Sold, 4/12/07).

Desiree: Even in our society, I’d want a boy. Still.

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Felicity: Really? Why?

Desiree: It’s just so much easier, I mean I imagine it would be easier to raise a boy, because you know there’s not as much talking involved. I mean, girls are so high maintenance and you need to make sure they know about their bodies, that they know about social circumstances and how life is different for girls. And it just seems like it would be a little more, “go have fun” with boys.

Carolina: Hmmph. (Gets a look on her face and shakes her head.)

Ms. L: Do you not agree Carolina?

Carolina: No. I would rather have a girl. Boys are trouble makers and they usually go more with their friends and what they want than with their families. And they want to go out all the time and you don’t know what they’re doing, or who they’re with.

Ms. L: You have a brother, right?

Carolina: Yeah, I have a younger brother, but he’s just one year younger. Life is just different for him, than for me. Like I said, he doesn’t have to worry about taking care of things or anyone but him.

Sydney: I have an older brother. He’s the older one, but I have to get him up in the morning. I have to cook him dinner. He can’t work the, well I wouldn’t want him to work the stove, anyway, but...

(We all laugh).

Ms. L: How old is he Sydney?

Sydney: Seventeen.

Ms. L: And he can’t work the stove?

Sydney: The last time he tried to make chicken fingers that he could have just as easily put in the microwave, he melted our plastic container that he put in the OVEN (emphasis) and I woke up to smoke everywhere. I was like, are you kidding? And I cleaned up the mess of course.

Although Carolina was annoyed with her family’s system of freeing her brother from responsibility, Sydney seemed to take it in stride that it was her job to watch out for her brother, even though he was older. While she was clearly disgusted with his seeming
inability to work the oven, she actually believed that he was incapable of taking care of himself, thus it was her job to do so. When I asked her if she thought maybe he did things like melt plastic in the oven so that she would just do things for him, she looked flabbergasted by the idea. She insisted that he simply couldn’t do these things for himself and so she needed to do them for him.

Other girls reported that they had many family responsibilities surrounding caregiving; Melissa babysat her niece and nephew every weekend for her older sister. Jamie also was expected to frequently baby sit her cousins and other younger family members. Bethany’s father liked her to volunteer in the nursery at church. Several of the girls said they felt responsible for younger siblings and wanted to be there for them in ways that no one had been there for them. As Tammy commented about her younger sister,

See and for me, in reverse with my little sister, I look at her and I want her to be protected from all of those things, I don't want her to know about them or be hurt by them. And I also realized, she needs me and she looks up to me and she cares about me and I have to be more together for her. If I'm cutting myself or doing stupid things then what is going to happen to her, this person who cares about me (Tammy, Cut, 3/15/07).

Carolina echoed this sense of responsibility for siblings during a discussion on the book Cut. In the book, the main character begins cutting after her brother almost dies of an asthma attack one day while she is home with him.

Well, I was thinking I have a brother and you know how she talks about thinking what happens with her brother is her fault? And I think when we think something is our fault then sometimes we're really hard on ourselves and most people want
to punish themselves some how. Or you feel bad and you don't like who you are
and so then maybe you hurt yourself (Carolina, Cut, 3/15/07).

When the girls talked about their future roles in life, the role of being a mother
often came up, and the importance of taking good care of children. The girls described
why they thought some teenagers couldn’t be good parents, because they didn’t know
how to be selfless enough to put taking care of someone else first and foremost. They
were especially scandalized one afternoon when they began talking about a teenaged girl
they knew who they felt was a bad mother (4/19/07):

Tammy: And like, like, she’s not even a good parent.
Sydney: Yeah, she’s not.
Ms. L: Well, how are you a good parent at 14?
Sydney: Yeah, my mom after she met her, she told me if I ever had kids, my life
would be gone. I would be in the house, I would be taking care of the kid; it
would be my responsibility. That girl goes out all the time.
 Tammy: And the dad is horrible.
Ms. L: So are her parents basically raising the baby?
Tammy & Sydney: Yeah.
Tammy: It’s just a horrible situation.

Carolina: But I think you can be young and be a good mother, because I know a
girl who’s 22 or 23 and she’s in college and she’s not a good mother, she goes out
and parties all the time and gets drunk. And I know a couple of younger girls who
are better moms than her, so it depends.

Tammy: I mean if I had a baby, my life would be devoted to it.
Sydney: I want kids, but when I’m old…
Tammy: ...I don’t want kids
Jamie: I want three kids, two girls and a boy.

Felicity: You gotta have kids Tammy!

Ms. L: Do you have their names picked out too?

Jamie: Yeah. (blushes)

Sydney: I like the name Tyler, so I like that name, for a boy. I want that name.

Tammy: I like girls’ names for guys. No wait, I mean guys’ names for girls. I do know guys named Shannon and Ashley though. But if I had a girl, I would give her a guy’s name and maybe just change the spelling.

Here the girls walk through their own future roles as mothers and contrast them to a “bad mother” they know who doesn’t take adequate care of her child. While clearly a 14-year-old mother who goes out and parties is disconcerting, so is the readiness with which the girls describe their own future roles as mothers. I saw them as clearly identifying with the role of being maternal in other areas of their lives as well.

I was in my third trimester of pregnancy during the Book Group, and frequently during our social time prior to Book Group discussions the girls referred to my pregnancy, asking questions. The above interchange during a Book Group discussion was not the only time that the subject of babies, baby names, and future roles as wives and mothers came up during our time together. While my pregnancy may have been an impetus for some of this discussion, many of the girls had already mapped out their plans for future children, including the number of kids they wanted to have, the names they wanted to give these future children, and often, their desire to stay home with their children to “take care of them.” During one such discussion when I mentioned that I had always been a working mother, Carolina commented that being a teacher would be a “good job for a mom” because you can still take care of your children.
Being Nice

In addition to being pretty and thin, another characteristic girls described as being important was the issue of being “nice.” Niceness was an important theme that ran through many of our discussions and the girls heavily critiqued characters or girls they knew in real life who weren’t “nice.” Tying in to the theme of taking responsibility for others, girls in the Book Group defined being “nice” as being self-sacrificing, not being aggressive, and being kind to others. Being nice is important for others to like you—boys—but also girls, as the girls in Book Group critiqued those who they saw as not nice. This came out in several different Book Group discussions, such as the following one from *Dreamland* (3/22/07).

Jamie: That's the worst, because if a guy has everything you want, he could be controlling or mad, for some reason then you want them.

Carolina: Well, nobody's perfect.

Jamie: Yeah, but I think girls try a lot. They try to be nicer, or prettier, or whatever they think boys want.

Carolina: Yeah, I think girls do try harder. They think they should. We should be nice.

Jamie: Yeah, like I’m always upset with myself if I’m not nice.

Carolina: Well, if you’re not nice, then you won’t have friends or a boyfriend.

Being nice was a way of being feminine. Being nice helped you attract boys and keep friends. Being nice was also a part of what boys expected from girls—like being pretty. When asked by one of the other participants why she didn’t stand up to her boyfriend more, Jamie said, “Well, I don’t want him to be mad at me. I don’t want him to think I’m being mean to him” (4/12/07). In fact, being nice was so important in the
girls' eyes that they felt the book *Life in the Fat Lane* should serve as a cautionary tale for the dangers of not being nice (*Life in the Fat Lane*, 4/26/07).

Jamie: I really think this is a good book for girls. It’s a good book because you learn about being nice to people and Lara learns about being nice to people, well not at the beginning…

Tammy: Yeah, at the beginning, she’s not nice; she’s calling that other girl Fatty Patty…

Carolina: Yeah, at first I didn’t see her as being mean, I think she was just clueless.

Jamie: She was like a two-faced at the beginning though. Yeah, like that girl who was her friend but who wanted to get with her boyfriend, they always like talked bad about each other. But then she was like oh, I’m going to be homecoming queen and that will show her. Yeah, she was mean.

Desiree: I mean she is pretty shallow though, all she cares about is the homecoming queen thing and she is sizing up all her competition and they’re saying some pretty bad things about the other girls.

Bethany: Yeah and when the other girl gets the chicken pox, she’s like YES! And then she says maybe I should call her and her mom is like, that is so sweet. See, a sweet girl like that is exactly the sort of person they’ll want for Homecoming Queen. So the message is don’t be sweet because it’s the right thing to do, do it because then you’ll be homecoming queen, right?

Carolina: Yeah, especially once she starts gaining the weight, then no one wants anything to do with her. And once she starts gaining the weight, she doesn’t seem as nice either. It was easy to be nice when everyone thought you were perfect. Once she has problems, not so much.

*Gaps and Silences*

Interestingly, although issues of class, race, and gender are difficult to separate from one another, the girls in this study rarely, if ever discussed issues of class and race as they intersected with their notions of themselves as girls. Many of the characters in the books we read were white; issues of class and race were often secondary to issues of
gender in the books. One of the only conversations about race and culture, as tied to the girls’ own sense of identity, came up regarding the issues of Quinceaneras. Three of the girls in the study were Hispanic; all three had had Quinceaneras the previous school year when they turned fifteen. (I had been invited to and attended both Jamie and Carolina’s Quinceaneras, including a mass and a party on their fifteenth birthday. This was a common tradition in the Hispanic community, especially among those who were Roman Catholic. The Quinceanera mass traditionally celebrates a girl’s transition from childhood to young womanhood and involves a vow to be a virgin until marriage.)

During a discussion of the book, *Dreamland*, the girls began discussing their own dating experiences. Tammy began a conversation about a girl she knew who was pregnant and preparing for her Quinceanera. The three Hispanic girls in the group were upset with Tammy for suggesting the girl would be participating in such an event if she were pregnant; they strongly tied the experience of having a Quinceanera with their identity as being virginal and “pure.” They discussed how this was what made the experience “special.” This was one of the rare times in Book Group when a conversation became heated; Carolina especially seemed quite offended that Tammy (a white girl) would suggest that you could participate in a church event like this when you were pregnant. Tammy and Melissa didn’t seem to “get it” according to comments that both Jamie and Carolina made after Book Group that day (*Dreamland*, 4/19/07):

Tammy: It’s weird for me to think of people who are 16 and haven’t been kissed though, because just to contrast that, I know a couple of girls who are 14 and they’re getting ready for their Quinceanera and they’re going to be in it, pregnant. So they’re going to be in this beautiful dress, pregnant.

Melissa: Do they make maternity Quinceanera dresses?

Carolina: No, that doesn’t happen, unless your parents don’t know you’re
pregnant. I mean that’s part of it, you can’t have that in the church, because part
of the celebration is that you’re pure. I mean if you’re pregnant and your parents
don’t care, you can have a party, but you can’t have the ceremony at the church.

Maria: Yes, because it’s celebrating that you’re pure and a young woman, but that
you’re still a virgin.

Carolina: Yeah, but that’s the whole point, so you can’t go to the church and have
the blessing if you’re pregnant. And that’s the main thing, that’s the special thing.

Another gap in the discussion around issues of identity were assumptions of
heterosexual identity; the girls always framed their experiences and the experiences they
also attributed to other adolescent girls from a frame of heteronormativity; being kissed
by a boy, meeting a nice boy, heterosexual romance, etc. Heteronormativity (Britzman,
1993) is a social discourse that suggests that the experiences of all girls and women are
naturally heterosexual experiences. Although this seemed to be comfortable for the Book
Group members, I did reflect in my field notes and analytical memos about how this
group might have been changed had a girl who was not heterosexual joined the group.
Would the experience of Book Group support her identity in the same ways that it did for
these girls?

Summary

Book Group was a space where participants were able to come together as readers
and as girls, to discuss literature they had chosen based upon their interests and concerns
as adolescent female readers. In discussing the texts we read, in which characters
struggled with issues that participants had listed as being of importance to adolescent
girls—issues tied to the body—girls not only discussed the textual lives of the characters
and the issues the novels raised, but their own embodied lives as well. The experience of
Book Group and the girls’ discussions were important data sources for my readings and
interpretations of girls’ sense of self. The girls strongly self-identified as readers and their ties to books, reading, and the world of print led me to think of them as “book people.” Girls associated being a reader with reading for purposes other than those derived from schooled spaces, although they often felt the pressures of school-assigned reading robbed them of the time and pleasure of their own private, personal reading. Girls also wanted to read about issues they saw as particularly important and tied to their experiences as girls, including “girl issues” such as body image, boy troubles, etc.

Book Group discussions also were analyzed for important themes and issues regarding participants’ sense of identity as adolescent girls. Their conversations, the ways in which they responded to texts, and their own comments on questionnaires, Identity Artifacts and in exit interviews all yielded data related to the major themes listed in Table Four. My analysis then reflected identities as being shaped by issues including friendships, their bodies, their sexuality, personal troubles and fears, past experiences in junior high, and issues of behaving as girls “should,” such as being nice or being a caregiver. Although the themes and issues discussed in question two relate to my readings of girls’ personal sense of identities as gendered readers, it is important to address that in keeping with socio-cultural, constructivist, and critical theories on literacy and identity development, that these girls’ sense of their identities are not created in isolation or independently from greater social discourses regarding literacy and gender. After all, “individuals...are not the sole authors of the self but rather are authored in language and by social practice” (Britzman, 1993, p. 32).

Question three of this study then overlaps and bridges with issues raised in question two. Social discourses about gender, particularly femininity, affect and shape
girls’ sense of self. In question three I look more specifically at the discourses about femininity and gender that the girls identify and discuss in Book Group discussions, rather than how they internalize them and reflect them in their own narrated tales of personal identity. In this separate cut of similar data sources, I examined and coded examples of social discourses that girls either critiqued or reflected in their Book Group discussions. To develop my codes, I used current research and scholarly literature that discusses the issues of discourse surrounding adolescent female identity and issues of hegemonic femininity (Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1998; Fine, 1988, 1992; Pillow, 1997, 2002; Taylor et al, 1995; Tolman, 1994, 2006). Hegemonic texts, such as those frequently read and viewed by adolescents often serve to replicate and reinforce social discourses about gender, race, power, and culture (Fairclough, 2003; Younger, 2003).

Question Three: Can literature based discussions provide spaces for adolescent girls to identify and critique socially situated discourses regarding issues associated with femininity and the body?

While question two looked at ways in which girls’ conversations, readings, and experiences in Book Group reflected and revealed aspects of their narrated identities and sense of self, question three examined the ways in which girls identified or labeled social messages or discourse they saw within the texts themselves. Another layer of the analysis examined the ways in which girls’ Book Group discussions either supported or “took up” dominant social discourse about issues related to adolescent girls or whether girls took a critical stance and resisted dominant social discourses about femininity. “Closely tied with the concept of a critical perspective is that of resistance, a related
process in which girls consciously or unconsciously resist psychological and relational disconnection that can impede development and threaten their psychological health” (Taylor et al, 1995, p. 18).

Examining the ways in which adolescent readers either reproduce or resist dominant social discourse within their readings of literature is particularly important in literary study and instruction as research in poststructural and cultural studies has illustrated that students’ responses to literature must be examined within larger social, cultural, and historical confines in which texts are written, read, and examined (Davies, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Luke, 1988; Mellor & Patterson, 2000, 2004; O’Neill, 1993; Pirie, 1997). O’Neill (1993) describes reading as a “learned practice of making meanings” (p. 19); thus reading and literature instruction in classrooms reveals important assumptions on the parts of teachers about how and why texts should be read and examined. Participants in this study described literature instruction and pedagogy within their current language arts course that led them to believe that literature study primarily consisted of analyzing texts for symbolism, imagery and other “hidden meanings” (Tammy, exit interview, 05/09/07) that authors have created within texts.

This study involved the use of research in reader response theories on literature circles and literature based instruction (Alvermann & Young, 1996; Evans, 2002; Eeds & Peterson, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995, 2005; Serafini & Giorgis, 2003), encouraging participants within the space of Book Group to have the freedom to voice their own personal responses and readings of literature related to issues of the body. As an English teacher, I was continually searching for ways to help encourages students to take a critical stance (Franzak, 2006; Lewis, 2000; McLaughlin, 2004) on what they read and in
their responses to literature. Inspired by work by Mellor & Patterson (2000, 2004) and others working with high school English classes, I wanted to explore ways in which critical practices offer opportunities to deconstruct racist, sexist, and other limiting or oppressive readings of texts and social discourses. Question three then is an analysis of the ways in which literature discussions such as Book Group might offer spaces for students to take a critical stance on dominant social discourses; specifically within the context of this study, discourses related to gendered and embodied identities of adolescent girls.

In the exit interviews with each girl, I asked them how realistic they thought the books we read were; in other words, how accurately did the books depict the experiences of being an adolescent girl? While all of the books we read together fell under the category of “realistic fiction,” reality is relative and these books, although designed for young adults are written by adults. The participants in Book Group felt that the books we read together depicted, for the most part, a very accurate portrayal of adolescent life.

Although Sold was a realistic fiction book, the girls noted that it was the hardest for them to relate to in some ways, as the culture and geography of the book were foreign to their own experiences. Still, they believed all the books we read to be realistic. As Bethany said, “They all dealt with life issues and with different things that girls go through and that you see a lot today” (exit interview, 5/10/07). It was important to establish whether the girls thought the books themselves and the portrayal of adolescent female experiences were accurate in the books before analyzing the girls’ responses to these texts, particularly the social discourses surrounding femininity and issues of the
body. In their exit interviews, individual girls described the books we read as very realistic to the experiences they viewed as common to adolescent girls in today's society.

I identified five main themes the girls discussed that I interpreted as representing dominant social discourses about femininity and gender. Initially, this study sought to analyze and discuss issues of the body as they related to adolescent girls. Some of the discourse the girls discussed ties into issues of the body—including issues of appearance, sexuality, and equality/power. In addition, girls brought up related issues tied into femininity such as romance and marriage and family.

Table 6: Question Three Themes, Social Discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appearance &amp; Body Image</strong></td>
<td>• ...well, if she has better insight now than that's great, but I still want her to be able to go back to being thin and pretty (Sydney, <em>Life in the Fat Lane</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>• Because guys don't care. They don't care how much you love them. And you can give them everything you have and they still don't care (Maria, <em>Dreamland</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>• I mean you see it through Caitlin's eyes at first and it seems like they have this wonderful little love going on. At first they seem like a really nice couple and even though they don't have money they get by on what they have, which seems romantic (Desiree, <em>Dreamland</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage &amp; Family</td>
<td>• That happens here too...women choose their husbands over their kids. They're afraid to stand up to them (Carolina, <em>Sold</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power &amp; Equity</td>
<td>• Why is it so important to have a man? They have the stepfather and he does nothing for the family, the women are the strength of the family. He does nothing for them, but they're supposed to be happy just because they have a man there. It makes no sense to me (Felicity, <em>Sold</em>).</td>
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Discourses about Appearance...

The girls described in their exit interviews how *Life in the Fat Lane* (Bennett, 1998) to them was a realistic look at the messages girls are sent about how you are supposed to look. As Bethany said, "She started out looking like Barbie and that’s what it’s like today, everyone’s trying to portray the Barbie image, the plastic, the perfect, the pressure" (exit interview, 5/10/07). As mentioned previously, issues related to the body and appearance had strong impacts upon girls’ perceptions of themselves and their identities. Girls frequently described the multiple messages they received from a variety of sources—the media, boys, other girls, their parents—about how they should look and the importance of being thin and attractive. During our Book Group discussions of *Life in the Fat Lane*, girls examined and discussed the social messages girls are sent about the way they should look, what they should weigh, and the overall importance of being pretty (*Life in the Fat Lane, 4/19/07*):

Tammy: Oh my gosh, that was so annoying when she’s like my husband doesn’t like me to smoke but he really wouldn’t like it if I gained weight, so I smoke to stay thin. I was like, c’mon lady, it’s called celery.

(Laughter)

Tammy: I mean, c’mon.

Ms. L: Well, I think a lot of people do that right. They don’t want to stop smoking because they think they’ll stay thin.

Carolina: Yeah and Lara gets that message right. They’re talking about the smoking, and it’s better to be thin than anything else, even if she kills herself. The worst thing would be to gain weight.

Carolina describes the “message” that is sent to adolescent girls such as Lara, the main character in *Life in the Fat Lane*, about what is important—not health, but thinness.
Being thin is of utmost importance, not because it is a sign of health, but because of the beauty factor. Staying thin by smoking cigarettes or starving oneself is seen as preferable to being heavy—the issue is not really about healthiness, it’s about appearance. Tammy is upset by this message, especially considering its source in the novel, the main character’s parents. Girls in the book group described how much they “hated” and “ despised” the parents in the novel, as they only served to reinforce the discourse that thinness was of the utmost importance. As Felicity said, “The dad is just horrible too. When his daughter is thin he calls her princess, but once she gains weight, he can barely stand to look at her” (Life in the Fat Lane, 5/03/07).

The girls also discussed the fact that social discourse about being thin is more largely targeted to adolescent girls than adolescent boys. In the novel, when Lara gains a large amount of weight unexpectedly, her boyfriend still dates her and expresses concern for her. The girls found this largely unrealistic, and thought that there was a double standard that existed for women’s appearance vs. men’s appearance (Life in the Fat Lane, 5/03/07).

Tammy: Yeah, I don’t know, I don’t think there are too many guys who would still stick with their girlfriend while she gained over 100 pounds suddenly.

Sydney: Yeah, no way.

Jamie: I did think it was good in the book how at the end, no at the middle, when she has to change schools and she’s gained all that weight, now she has become the other Patty. I mean they start calling her names and she gets upset and then she thinks why did I do that? And then the one girl offers her a diet plan and she remembers how she did that to the other girl and now she knows how it feels, when she thought she was being so nice and helpful before.

Ms. L: Yeah, I really feel for her when her parents come to her and are telling her they’re moving. I mean it was hard enough for her to go to school having gained the weight...
Jamie: Yeah, they know her before she was fat.

Melissa: Yeah, but when she has to go to a new school, she’s like, I’m just going to be the big fat girl.

Sydney: Yeah, right.

Desiree: I wanted to talk about the boyfriend thing again. I mean we say it’s unrealistic, but then when you find out why he stayed with her, because he didn’t want people to think he was a bad guy for your breaking up with her because she was heavy or overweight. That’s why he stayed with her.

Tammy: Yeah, that’s it.

Ms. L: But do you think that’s realistic though? I mean, I’m not saying it’s not, but do you think most guys would say I’m going to stay with her because I don’t want people to think I’m bad for dumping her because she’s heavy. Or would a guy be like she’s heavy, and I’m going to date a girl who’s not.

Sydney: Date a girl who’s not.

Tammy: Well if you really like the person it shouldn’t matter.

Jamie: Well, it shouldn’t matter, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.

Tammy: I don’t know, I mean since I’ve been going out with my boyfriend, he’s gained weight, but I still love him. And he’s not huge or anything, but he has his belly, and I still love him.

Desiree: Yeah, but it’s different with guys...

Jamie: Yeah, he’s not a girl. We all know it’s different for girls.

Tammy: If I gained weight, I think he would stay with me. He would.

Desiree: I don’t know, I don’t think this is very realistic. I mean if I was dating a guy and he put on a little weight, then okay. But if he went from this athletic body to this slob, then I don’t know....

Sydney: Slob...

Melissa: Well I think that’s honest.

Tammy: No, I think that’s mean.

Desiree: No, I think that’s honest.
Tammy: But see, I love my boyfriend. I mean if you love him, you wouldn’t.

Desiree: I don’t know.

Tammy: Yes, I would be like, I love him. I might be like, here’s some salad, but I would still love him.

(Laughter).

Melissa: Here’s that celery I was talking about. You’re so funny!

Tammy: I’m serious!

Sydney: I don’t know, I agree. I mean I’m not no size four, so if he accepts me, why would it matter if he gained a little weight? But there is a double standard for girls and guys with weight.

Carolina: I don’t know, I mean I guess if you’re already with someone. But if you don’t know someone, you mainly go at first on their looks. And then, you would not maybe go out with someone who was really, really heavy. I mean unless you fell in love with them first.

Tammy: Yeah, Sydney said something about a double standard, I mean how often do you see guys with heavy girls, but how often do you see girls with heavy guys? I mean girls who are in shape or are considered attractive with guys who maybe aren’t?

Desiree: Never.

Sydney: Really?

Tammy: I mean it’s just like watch TV, how many times have you seen it like a million times where the woman is all attractive and comes in and the husband is on the couch, vegging out. The guy is chubby and the girl is like, gorgeous. Everywhere—I mean you never see on TV or the movies a guy with a girl who is considered less attractive. It’s everywhere.

Here the girls enter into an extended conversation about the double standards that exist for girls’ appearance and weight vs. boys’. Many of the girls describe a discourse where it is viewed as okay for boys to be unfit or overweight, but not for girls. They describe how the media perpetuates this discourse by showing “chubby” men with
“gorgeous” women. The girls went on to mention specific television shows and movies that featured characters like this—including *The King of Queens* and other sitcoms.

When some girls in the group, such as Desiree, mentioned that they would be upset if their boyfriend gained large amounts of weight, she was criticized by other group members, including Tammy who said she thought this was “mean.” Jamie clearly states that “everyone” should know that weight issues are different for men than for women. Even though girls initially criticized a double standard where men’s appearance and weight is judged less harshly than women’s, the girls also reinforce this discourse in their conversation.

Even though the girls critiqued the notion of the double standard regarding appearance for men and women, they still often equated being thin or pretty with being “happy.” For example, below Sydney and some of the other girls describe how they disliked the ending of the novel as it didn’t conclude with Lara solving her medical problem and losing the weight. They said they wanted a “happy ending.” Sydney especially said that becoming thin was what could make the character happy again, even though in the novel, the character actually expresses contentment at the story’s conclusion, as she has learned to accept herself for more than her weight on the scale. Sydney actively resists this ending though; for her, the only happy ending could be Lara returning to her size 4 body (*Life in the Fat Lane, 5/03/07*).

Sydney: I wanted her to drop a lot of weight and be all pretty and get back with Jet.

Desiree: But yeah, I want her to realize something too along the way, to have learned something from it, don't you?

Sydney: No, I just want her to be able to go back to being happy. I don't care if she learned from it, isn't that awful?
Tammy: C'mon Sydney!

Sydney: Okay, well if she has better insight now than that's great, but I still want her to be able to go back to being thin and pretty.

Desiree: Yeah, she needed to learn though. Like she didn't get it when the girl in the bathroom was like I used to be 15 lbs heavier and I could help you lose weight. She didn't remember that was the same thing she did to Fatty Patty at the beginning.

Sydney: Yeah, well I would have been mad too if I were Lara, because c'mon, 15 pounds and 100 pounds is nothing like the same thing.

Desiree: I think it's the same thing; it's someone thinking they're helping when they're not.

Ms. L: Yeah, I don't think anyone likes unsolicited advice though, especially about your weight.

Desiree: Yeah, who wouldn't be offended if someone offered you a diet plan in the bathroom?

This discussion reflects themes that the girls discussed under their sense of personal identity and body image; although girls disliked Lara and her mother for having such limited notions about appearance, weight, and size, they also expressed their desires to be like Lara, at least physically. Ironically, some girls seemed to resist a major plot and characterization convention in the novel; that Lara learns to be happy with her weight and begins to see herself as more than a beauty queen or a pretty face. The novel's events emphasize that Lara has learned to accept herself as having an identity deeper than her outward appearance, a major character shift for Lara. Sydney actively resists this reading of the character and the book's events, wanting to see Lara “happy” which translates to being thin in her definition. Sydney describes a conflicted reading though; she comments that she is “awful” for wanting Lara to be thin at all costs, seeming to recognize on some level that her reading is reinforcing a message she has also critiqued at
other points in Book Group when she describes her own feelings of inadequacy surrounding her weight and appearance.

Another discourse that the girls picked up on and discussed was the issue of thinness as a necessary prerequisite for desire. Boys would not, could not, be attracted to a girl unless she was thin. In fact, boys who are with girls who are overweight must have something "wrong" with them. They often questioned why Lara’s boyfriend, Jet, would stay with her as she gained weight. Not once did they discuss that he might truly care about her as a person separate from her physical appearance; they just described this aspect of the novel as unrealistic. Towards the ending of the novel, after Lara has broken up with her boyfriend Jet, a boy at her new school has a crush on her. He is overweight as well and is teased by his classmates. When he approaches Lara, one of his peers begins calling him “Ferry Perry.” The girls picked up on this right away, saying:

Desiree: And then there is the new boy who likes her at the school.

Bethany: But all the kids call him "Fairy Perry" and make gay jokes about him, right. Like you would have to be gay to like the overweight girl?

The girls seemed to read this exchange in the novel as a reinforcement of boys’ heterosexual desire for girls to be predicated on issues of thinness. For a body to be desired in a heterosexual relationship, one must maintain approved social standards of appearance.

Discourses about Sexuality...

As discussed in question two, the girls in this study reported limited sexual experience of their own and most held fairly conservative views about sexual activity amongst teenagers. The girls described early sexual activity as dangerous for teenage
girls and often linked with what they saw as negative outcomes such as being treated poorly by boys, feeling rejected, and ending up pregnant. Sexuality was an issue in all of the books we read together except for Cut. The following exchange from a discussion of the book Dreamland highlights many of the girls’ assumptions about sexuality, which reflect dominant discourse about adolescent sexuality and sexual experience. In the scene the girls are discussing, the main character Caitlin has just had sex for the first time with her boyfriend, Rogerson, who is physically and emotionally abusive to her. In the novel, Caitlin expresses her belief that having sex with Rogerson will somehow make them closer and perhaps heal whatever is wrong in the relationship (Dreamland, 3/19/07).

Desiree: When she talks about sex and how she tells herself this is the closest you can get to another human being, I just think she's so got it wrong, because sex should be something that happens after you've already gotten that close to someone else.

Jamie: She thinks it's going to make things better, but it doesn't.

Carolina: Girls always think that it will make things better or make you closer, and it doesn't. It doesn't make you closer. She thought it would make things better, that's what girls think about sex.

Sydney: I think she's finally scared, he's finally worn her down and she doesn't trust him now but she still isn't going to leave.

Desiree: Plus now she's given him every part of her she possibly can give, that she has to give, and it still wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for him to stop hurting her.

Melissa: Yeah, maybe like Carolina said she thought it was going to be better now and it's not better. It hasn't changed anything really.

Maria: It got worse. Because guys don't care. They don't care how much you love them. And you can give them everything you have and they still don't care.

In this section of discussion, the girls describe several assumptions about sex.

First, they critique the argument that “sex makes you closer to someone else, or that sex
equals intimacy.” Desiree argues that Caitlin’s thoughts are flawed to think that sex makes you closer to someone else. Carolina agrees, saying that “that’s what girls think about sex.” The girls argue against a romanticized notion of sex equaling love, romance, and intimacy. They recognize that sex doesn’t necessarily bring closeness, but also acknowledge that many girls falsely believe this and enter into sexual relationships for the “wrong” reasons.

Yet at the same time, the girls introduce and argue for other limiting notions about sexuality. They discuss the act of sex and the loss of virginity as “every part of her she possibly can give” and “everything you have.” Who girls are then becomes integrally tied to their sexuality; this also carries frightening consequences for girls who do lose their virginity. If virginity is “everything you have,” what are girls once they have committed to sexual intercourse? They also position their sexuality as something they “give” to boys and that boys misuse, as Maria says, “And you can give them everything you have and they still don’t care.”

Interestingly also, there is no discussion of female desire or pleasure in the girls’ discussions of the sexual relationship between Rogerson and Caitlin, nor in their general discussions about sexuality. Although sex is a physically embodied act, they avoid discussions of bodily pleasure or feelings. Instead they concentrate their discussion primarily on the emotional and psychological aspects of sexuality—as something that does or does not bring you “closer,” makes you feel “better” or or that you “give” to someone you love.

The girls had other interesting discussions about society’s conflicting messages to young women about sexuality when reading the novel, Sold, which tells the story of girls
sold into teenage prostitution in India. In the following excerpt, the girls discuss a scene in the novel where one of the women who has been sold into prostitution finally earns enough money to return to her home town, to see her family and her daughter. This was something the young woman has been dreaming of for years (*Sold, 4/12/07*).

Desiree: Even if she did make it back home, I doubt they’d accept her.

Sydney: Yeah, cause there’s the one girl, she’s so excited because she gets to go home. And she’s paid enough to earn her way back home. And then she gets home and no one will, they turn her away; no one in town will talk to her. They turn her away because she’s shamed, even though she didn’t choose that life. Her father sold her and then he won’t take her back because she’s shamed.

Desiree: Yeah and she like buys things for them and makes sure her dad gets his surgery when he’s in pain, and he still just throws her out like she’s nothing.

Carolina: Yeah and that was so sad and then they told her daughter that she was dead. All she wanted was to see her daughter and her family.

Tammy: They act like she chose this rather than them choosing it for her.

Here, the girls are shocked and dismayed when the woman is turned away from her family because of the stigma she bears for her sexual activity and prostitution. The character being discussed was forced into prostitution to help keep her family from starving and uses the money she earns to help pay for a life-saving operation for her father. In the book, the young woman’s family would rather her daughter and the rest of the village think she is dead than know that she has been a prostitute, even though they are the ones who pushed her into the brothel. When Sydney speaks the words “shamed” to describe the character in the novel, she says it scornfully, as a critique of the girl’s family. The girls went on to discuss how the girl, who should be seen as a victim, is instead viewed as a pariah. The girls were clearly disturbed by these events in the novel and critiqued the notion of a woman’s social standing in the community being tied to her
sexual activities, especially those she had no control over herself. As Bethany asked, “So what? The men used her and now it’s her fault? Why does she have to take all the blame?” (Sold, 4/12/07). Here the girls begin to critique the association of shame with sexual behavior.

Yet, in online blog posts about the novel *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2000), the girls argue themselves for the idea that girls who are sexually active must some how “pay” for their actions. *The First Part Last* ends with the reader learning that Nia, the pregnant teenager in the novel, has suffered a stroke during labor and delivery of her daughter, Feather. Nia is left in a permanent vegetative state and will never see or raise her newborn child. Her boyfriend Bobby then decides to raise the baby on his own, rather than giving her up for adoption as he and Nia had previously planned. The girls had strong reactions to the novel and its tragic ending. In her posts on the online blog, Jamie said, “This was the saddest ending. This ending is scary because you realize that this is what can happen to you if you get pregnant. You can have sex and then you can pretty much be practically dead.” Sydney and Melissa responded to Jamie’s posts, also discussing the consequences of Nia’s (but not Bobby, the father’s) actions. Sydney said that the descriptions of Nia’s pregnancy, including a list of her physical ailments including hemorrhoids, gas, and swollen feet were, “Too much! See, this is why you shouldn’t have sex! If you do you’re going to look and feel gross!” Melissa agreed with Sydney and posted that, “Nia’s life would never have been the same any way. She would have had to pay for her decisions.” After their online posts, I questioned the girls about their thoughts about Nia’s pregnancy and her ultimate fate. The girls backtracked in their comments when I questioned them about why they thought Nia had to “pay” when Bobby
didn’t seem to in the novel. They seemed uncomfortable discussing their posts with me, which may have been complicated by the fact that I was eight months pregnant during our discussion. Sydney commented, “Well, I guess Bobby has to pay too because he’ll be getting up with the baby and he’s not getting any sleep. But that’s not how it usually is. Girls are the ones who have to pay, right? I mean, maybe not you because you have a husband. But usually girls who are our age, if they have a baby, it will be their job to have to deal with it” (Sydney, exit interview, 5/10/07).

Again, although this novel contains several passages that describe the intimate and passionate relationship between Nia and Bobby, the girls avoided discussing the actual sexualized bodies in the novel. *The First Part Last* does something rare in young adult literature and includes a description of female desire and sexual pleasure. The girls did not acknowledge any of these scenes in the novel; the only attention they pay to Nia’s body is in the comments by Syndey where Nia’s pregnant body and its aches and pains are described as a penance she must pay for her sexual activity. In the girls’ discussion of sexual activity and the sexualized adolescent girl, they critique a discourse of shame or punishment associated with sexual activity only when they see the sex as not voluntary or initiated primarily by men, such as in the discussion of *Sold*. When Nia freely enters into a sexual relationship with Bobby, one that includes a discourse of desire, pleasure and sexual agency on the part of a young woman, the girls introduce a discourse of penalty and penance.

*Discourses about Romance...*

The girls often spoke about their relationships with boyfriends or their desire to find a boyfriend during Book Group and especially during our social, informal times.
together. The girls often spoke about boys they thought were cute, or who liked who, etc. during our social chat times. Many of the girls talked about things they thought were “romantic,” and as our time together coincided with the Prom season, girls often discussed ways their friends had been asked to Prom that were “so romantic.” Their visions of romance involved boys asking them out in creative or public ways, boys giving them gifts or notes, and there was frequent, giggling-filled talk about kissing. In fact, boys and romance, along with discussions about fashion and appearance were the most common topics for our social chats. Issues of romance and relationships existed in all of the books that we read except for *Cut*. Below, girls discuss the romantic relationship in *Dreamland*, between the characters Caitlin and Rogerson. The girls expressed dissatisfaction with the dating relationship of the characters, as they felt that there was not enough romance involved (*Dreamland*, 3/22/07).

Sydney: They don't know each other.

Tammy: It's like when you first get a boyfriend, it's just about lust.

Desiree: Some relationships are like that. I mean they're in some sort of relationship, but not one that I would really want to be in.

Tammy: Not a healthy one.

Sydney: But I did really like him and I felt bad for him when he was at his parents' little party thing, I felt really bad.

Tammy: But that's the part, where if something really traumatic like that happened, and you can be together and just not say anything, but just be there, then that makes sense. But when they're together and they're driving and they just don't even talk, that's ridiculous to me.

Melissa: And they sort of have that moment after the thing with his dad where she comforts him. And they sort of have a tender moment there. Where they like understand each other.

Sydney: Before that though, I mean they've never really talked, all they do is
make out for hours.

Tammy: Like I met my boyfriend over the phone, so we were actually friends first, which was great. Or even if you're friends in class first...I mean, I can talk to him. It's not just oh my god, you're hot, I'm hot, let's kick it.

Here, the girls are critical of the relationship between Rogerson and Caitlin, as they complain of the lack of depth to the relationship. All they do is “make out” and they don’t “talk.” The girls described the importance of talk in a romantic relationship—they felt romance needed to have more than physical attraction.

The romantic relationship in *Dreamland* is a troubling one, and as the girls read further in the novel, they became more concerned with the romance, as they realized that Rogerson and Caitlin had larger problems than a lack of communication. Rogerson begins hitting Caitlin and abusing her emotionally and physically. Caitlin's only friend during this time is a girl named Karina, who has a troubled relationship of her own, where she is supporting a boyfriend who uses all of his free time and money to get high while she goes to work every day to pay the rent. The girls discuss these relationships and the issues of “being in love.”

Desiree: I was thinking about the ending and how she never got a chance to confront him. She kind of stood up to him by not getting up, but she never really expressed her anger or whatever it was she was feeling towards him...if she hated him or she was still in love with him.

Jamie: I think she fell in love with him.

Carolina: Yeah, she’s in love with him, that’s why she stays.

Jamie: Because in those situations where the guy hits you and you don't do nothing about it, it's crazy. ‘Cause like my grandma, she got married when she was like 15 with my grandpa and he used to hit her so much. Well, my dad's mom and now I see that and I know that's not good and I even asked her like you were so pretty, why would you put up with that. And it was because she loved him, so even though it wasn't good. And with Caitlin, that's why she stays, because she's in love with him. And that's why she never left him.
Sydney: Yeah, I don't think Karina wanted to leave, I think she was in love, but I also thought it was messed up how Caitlin builds up their relationship to be so great and loving. I mean he kept taking their money and not working and eventually Karina had just had it and couldn't do that any more. And they never really talked about their problems though even though they were both in the same boat in a lot of ways.

Jamie: I think it was basically like the same thing with her older sister. I mean Caitlin follows the boy just like her older sister did. And I mean she thinks Dave and Karina is romance, which is what she thinks is going on with Kat too, she is building up the romance of it all.

Maria: And Dave's really kind of a loser.

Desiree: Well, sometimes it takes a while before you realize that. You don't realize until way past halfway through that Dave is like he is, I mean you see it through Caitlin's eyes at first and it seems like they have this wonderful little love going on. At first they seem like a really nice couple and even though they don't have money they get by on what they have, which seems romantic. But then you learn that only she works and you figure out that he doesn't go to work, he sleeps all the time...

Carolina: I never thought he was a good guy. Because he like buys her pot and if you care about someone, why would you want them to do drugs? And just like him knowing Rogerson, and them being friends...I don't know.

Sydney: I know and sure love is great, but when you can't even turn the power on, because he takes the money for drugs.

Desiree: I kind of wonder why Caitlin never questioned Rogerson about the things he does and why? And she never questioned the dealing or where he goes when he leaves her in the car.

Ms. L: It's like she's under his spell almost from the beginning, right?

Sydney: Yeah, but why?

Melissa: His hair?

(Laughter)

Carolina: That is so funny that they always mention his hair.

Desiree: I don't know he seems like really charming and he's kind of dangerous. I don't know, I mean girls like that don't they?
Sydney: He's mysterious.
Desiree: Yeah, he is dangerous.

The above discussion seems to reflect several different discourses about romance and relationships. Many of the girls matter-of-factly state that Caitlin and Karina stay in bad relationships because they are “in love.” This was a common theme in Book Group discussions, the concept that being in love makes women blind or unable to act in their own best interest. Girls often made excuses for unwise or dangerous behavior based upon characters or other girls they knew being “in love.” Here the girls do critique the notion a bit, suggesting that Caitlin and Karina should have left their abusive relationships, but they quite easily ascribe this behavior to being in love rather than offering any other reason. In their discussions, they describe a discourse where being “in love” robs girls of agency; girls are unable to act in autonomous, self-promoting ways when they are in love.

Although girls’ personal discussions often built up “being in love,” here they begin to offer a counter-discourse, as Sydney comments that being in love isn’t going to “turn the power on.” Desiree though offers the suggestion that being poor together is in some way “romantic.” Being in love is seen as clouding the vision of the characters; they make poor choices because they are in love; they are not held fully accountable for their decisions. Finally, the girls discuss the idea of “dangerous” or “mysterious” boys as being attractive and romantic—even though the characters who are dangerous and mysterious in this novel are also abusive and involved in criminal activity.
Discourses about Marriage and Family...

Girls' narrated identities as discussed in question two revealed that one of the roles they saw themselves taking on as adolescent girls was the care-giver. They often expressed maternal feelings for friends and family members and accepted that part of their role in the family was to take care of siblings. Interestingly, girls had strong feelings about the ways in which marriage and family were portrayed in the books that we read together. Some girls romanticized marital relationships and spoke longingly of when they married and had children. Others argued against early marriage and thought that girls their age shouldn’t be thinking about getting married yet. All of them spoke in ways though that assumed that eventually they would marry. The following conversation about Dreamland (3/29/07) introduces these themes.

Desiree: I don't know, I think it's realistic. Rina chooses the bad guy. But I did think it was a little creepy how he gave her the promise ring, like oh we're going to get married, I gave you a ring, and in another two years after we graduate, I'll give you an engagement ring.

Carolina: I don't know...

Jamie: Who wouldn't want that? I mean she's with a nice guy, he wants to be with her, he gives her a ring, I mean who wouldn't want that?

Desiree: I don't know, not Rina, I guess.

In the above interchange, Desiree speaks out against the idea of thinking about and committing to the notion of being engaged while in high school, calling it “creepy.” She rolls her eyes at the idea of high school students being ready for such a commitment. However, some of the other girls in Book Group view this plot point very differently. Carolina and Jamie both protest Desiree’s reading of teenagers as being too young to think about or want to become engaged. As Jamie says, “Who wouldn’t want that?” To
Jamie, it seems natural and appropriate for adolescent girls to want a serious relationship that has the potential for marriage. The girls went on to discuss a classmate who had graduated the preceding school year whose boyfriend had proposed to her at the Senior Assembly that precedes graduation. Most of the girls thought this was very romantic and retold the story with great enthusiasm. Desiree was the one girl who spoke out against the idea of getting engaged so young. Early commitment to marriage and engagement was described as a desirable thing to many of the girls.

The girls had a more negative reaction to the marital relationship described in the book *Sold*, which again is set in a culture foreign to the girls. However, the events of the novel described below cross cultural boundaries, as the girls explore in their discussion. Here the girls discuss the main character’s stepfather who contributes little to the family, yet is expected by the cultural values of the setting to be treated with great respect and deference (*Sold, 4/19/07*):

Desiree: I know how her mom thinks that they’re the best thing you can have and it’s better to have a drunk, gambler than no man at all, but I figure if she thinks that her daughter is going to be sold into prostitution, I don’t know, she may go against what she’s been taught to save her daughter.

Carolina: She would want to, but she would be afraid. She thinks she needs him. That happens here too...women choose their husbands over their kids. They’re afraid to stand up to them.

Ms. L: I think that’s a good point. I mean, we keep saying in this culture...but I think you’re right, here right now in America that happens too, right? Some women think they are better off having a drunk or a gambler than no man at all.

Desiree: Well, I think some women are like that, but I think the majority, I’m not sure though, I think that they’re like he’s horrible, or he’s like this or that, it’s more like they love him, than the society. Like our society says if he’s a horrible man and he beats you and he drinks and he gambles your money, then like you’re supposed to get rid of him. But the other society they say he’s a man, keep him. Ours is more your personal feelings and what you feel inside rather than you’ve
been taught and what you’ve been told.

Sydney: I mean I don’t think she ever says she loves him.

Desiree: I don’t think she does.

Carolina: Another thing you have to think about is that they’re from a very poor family. That happens here too or in other countries. If a woman is very poor, she doesn’t feel like she can leave her husband, and especially if they have kids. Like some of my relatives in Mexico, they have a lot of kids and their husbands might not be that great, but what are they going to do? They feel like they need a husband, a dad, even if he’s not so great. They feel like they can’t leave.

Here the girls begin by critiquing the message that “having a man (husband) is the most important thing.” At first, Desiree attributes this social discourse to “their culture,” but Carolina quickly points out that this message crosses cultures, that women in many societies, ours included often accept the message that having a man, even an abusive man is better than no man at all. Desiree still argues that most women in society would not accept this line of thinking. Carolina again displays resistance to the argument that this discourse does not exist in multiple cultures, pointing out that women may have reasons for staying other than cultural values. She points out that issues of power exist and that women, because of their income level or because of the children they have, may feel trapped and unable to leave a difficult situation. This was a bit of an “aha” moment in the Book Group discussion that day, when Carolina discussed issues of poverty and power—other girls went on to agree that women are sometimes trapped in situations because of their lack of income or education. As Bethany said, “It’s easy to say why don’t you leave, I guess. I never thought of it that way, but that’s like blaming them instead of realizing that they are trapped there and they probably wish they could leave” *(Sold, 4/12/07).*
Discourses about Power and Equity

During our reading of the novel *Sold*, girls were astounded and angered by the lack of power women held in the society of the main character, Lakshmi. Lakshmi lives in a poor village in Nepal and early on in the novel, when she first begins to menstruate, her mother takes her aside to teach her what her role must be now as a woman. The girls in Book Group kept coming back to this point in the novel, which does have huge implications for the rest of the novel, especially for issues of equity and power for women. They discussed one of the guidelines Lakshmi’s mother gives her for being a good wife; she must wash her husband’s feet at night and then afterwards, she should drink the water used to bathe her husband’s feet (4/19/07):

Jamie: It was good. It was weird too, especially at the beginning with her mom, like when she tells her how you have to act around a man. I thought that was really weird.

Sydney: Drink the foot water. I mean when you think about what that symbolizes, it’s really degrading. She should wash his feet and then drink the water. I mean it means you’re not worth clean water.

Tammy: I didn’t see it as the only water she drank was that, I saw it as after she washed his feet, she had to drink it. You know what I’m saying?

Sydney: Yeah, but think of it. His grody feet get washed in clean water, but you have to drink the dirty water.

Tammy: Yeah.

Desiree: Yeah. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I think that is pretty telling. You deserve to drink, what do you deserve, dirty feet water. But he deserves to have his feet washed in clean water.

Here the girls describe the messages they see Lakshmi receiving; the foot washing and the drinking of the water are symbolic of her lack of power and equal standing. As Desiree says, this scene is “telling” about the status that women have compared to men in
the society; women must drink dirty water while men have their feet bathed with clean water. The girls go on to discuss the other aspects of motherly advice Lakshmi’s mother passes on to her, including the importance of giving birth to a son, rather than daughters. She is also told other ways that she can treat her husband with deference and respect, while she continually serves as a model of self-sacrifice. Lakshmi questions her mother as to why women must suffer so much. Her mother’s response becomes an important motif throughout the novel, “Simply to endure is to triumph.” The girls in Book Group were angered by this advice and wanted more equitable treatment for Lakshmi (4/19/07):

Carolina: I just thought this whole thing was so sad, and to think of a mom giving this advice to her daughter? That this is the advice you would want her to have? I would want more, more for my daughter. The daughter wants to know why women have to suffer. But then she tells her that in a way, women are stronger than men. She says, “This has always been our fate. Simply to endure is to triumph.”

Desiree: I read the back of the book where they quote it, “To endure is to triumph” and I was like, wow, that is going to be a really good part of the book and then I read it and it’s like, that’s not all that exciting. It was kind of disappointing and a letdown.

Ms. L: I mean I think, well, isn’t that one of the themes she comes back to? I mean later on she remembers her mom telling her that. When she’s in the brothel, I don’t know. I mean do you agree with that, to simply endure something is to triumph? To endure it?

Desiree: I think it depends on the circumstance. Like if it were Dreamland, to endure Roger beating her, that wouldn’t be a triumph. But to endure the fact that you had a horrible relationship and to begin getting on with life, that is a triumph. So it just depends.

Felicity: Yeah, and I kept thinking about all of that. I mean, why is it so important to have a son? Why is it so important to have a man? They have the stepfather and he does nothing for the family, the women are the strength of the family. He does nothing for them, but they’re supposed to be happy just because they have a man there. It makes no sense to me.

Melissa: Yeah, the mother is always telling her they’re lucky to have a man…
Felicity: Yeah, but he does nothing. He doesn’t do any work, he gambles away the money, he doesn’t bring anything to the family. I mean the whole thing with drinking the foot water. So why is it so important to have a son? So he can grow up to be like the step dad? Just being a boy is enough? I mean I’d rather have a daughter then, because at least she is going to do something.

Desiree: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I mean they’re all like, sons are great. And then basically all they do is get pampered by the women.

Felicity: Yeah, it makes no sense whatsoever.

Desiree: Yeah, you think they’d be looking forward to having the girls, because they’re the ones who take care of their parents in their older age and carry the family.

Melissa: Yeah, someone to help and take care of you.

Carolina begins this discussion by expressing her desire for Lakshmi’s mother to abandon the cultural values of her society and to demand “more” for her daughter. She wants to see the character resist the discourse about women being less worthy than men. At the same time, Carolina describes how the values described that limit women’s possibilities in the culture also hold a hidden meaning that “women are stronger than men.” Carolina reads the character of the mother as acknowledging what Carolina herself seems to hold to be true, that women are stronger than men even if they are treated with less respect. In fact, ironically, women are stronger because they must endure inequitable treatment.

The girls clearly struggled to grapple with the messages Lakshmi is given about her role as a woman in her society. The girls kept coming back to how it didn’t “make sense” that the culture would be this way; the girls were not themselves able to make sense of cultural values that they saw as inequitable and unfair. The girls carry on an extended conversation of why the cultural values privileging men are nonsensical to
them, as women are “the strength of the family,” and daughters are the one who actually “do something” such as “take care of you when you get older.” Men in contrast simply “get pampered by the women.” While the girls expressed their inability to bridge or connect to what they saw as these “foreign” values, they interestingly did not draw connections to other issues of inequity between genders that exist in other societies, including our own. This was despite the fact that in their own previous discussions of the roles within their own families they had had very similar conversations about how boys in their family were often treated preferentially to girls. The girls seemed to find it much easier to identify and critique inequities in the textual and cultural world of Lakshmi than in their own lived experiences.

Finally, the girls looked at the issues of inequity as Lakshmi is sold into prostitution by her stepfather. In her culture, the father has the ability and the right to “sell” her to a traveling woman who trades girls to brothels in India. Once in the Indian brothel, Lakshmi fully begins to understand her lack of power and control over her life and her body. The following conversation stood out to me and was marked in my field notes and analytical memos as significant as it one of the rare conversations in Book Group where girls directly addressed issues of the body; in fact this is perhaps the most direct, concrete discussion of the actual physical body that occurred during the course of Book Group. Here they express their strong, almost visceral reactions to the violation and mistreatment of Lakshmi’s body in the novel (Sold, 4/19/07):

Maria: It’s so horrible when she describes how it is when the men are sleeping with her.

Carolina: I know.
Ms. L: Yeah, I know we haven’t really talked about that, and really it’s a huge focus of the book, right?

Maria: Yeah, she has to have sex with all of these horrible, random, old men. But I think the worst part is when she describes when the first men come and take her and her body feels like it’s being torn in two.

Carolina: It’s just horrible, it’s like you can almost feel that in your own body when you read it, you can almost imagine how horrible that pain is.

Sydney: Yeah, she’s only a 13-year-old girl and she’s a little girl. She literally was being ripped in two when that happened to her.

(Various girls shudder and cringe in their seats as we describe these scenes.)

Maria: She’s still very...

Melissa: little.

Maria: Yeah, like when they bargain for her, they say how she doesn’t have hips yet. She’s just a little virgin and they just…it’s awful. They drug her and she has no power over herself, over her body.

Desiree: Yeah, this part just made me gag when I was reading it. I was in the middle of geometry class reading it and I was like, oh my god, it was just awful. It was like page 103, when she first realizes what she’s there for. And she, this old man is on top of her and she’s like oh my god, this is what I’m here for. I’m not here to be a maid. I’m here to be a prostitute. And it just kind of made me sick inside because the way they’re describing it, it’s not like it’s in terrible detail, but it’s you just imagine it. You get that feeling.

Felicity: Yeah, it’s not horribly graphic, but it’s enough. There is no way you can read it and not imagine it, almost imagine it happening to you. And she’s like this 13-year-old girl and this old man is basically raping her...it makes you just sick. And she fights, she really fights it, but how is she supposed to be able to fight them all off?

Sydney: Like she doesn’t even expect that her stepfather could be that bad of a person.

Desiree: I still can’t believe that he’s that bad of a person, I mean, and then he’s like mentioning her hips to barter more for her body, I’m just like, how can he do that?

Felicity: Yeah, I don’t know how he can do that.
Carolina: He doesn’t even think of her as a person. He thinks of her as something he owns, something he can sell. He is so bad; I don’t think he feels anything for her.

Felicity: It’s so weird too how it’s called Happy Palace there.

Sydney: Well I guess it’s happy for the men.

Sydney’s last line is telling—the girls continued to talk about the men who frequent these brothels and the lack of power the girls who are sold into prostitution have over their own bodies and their own futures. The concept that women can be sold by their fathers and bought by other men is truly disturbing and the girls’ comments reflect their horror and consternation over the lack of power that the characters’ have over their own lives. Here the girls clearly discuss the physical body of the character and how she has little to no power over her own body, something the girls found horrifying and sickening. Although the girls discuss “imagining” how horrible this would be to have happen to your body, the girls again don’t draw any connections to ways in which women’s bodies are abused or misused in other situations or cultures other than the description of the Indian brothels. Although the equity issues within the culture of the text may have made embodied discourses of power more transparent, issues of power and equity are clearly not absent from their own lives although they were absent from their discussions.

Summary

Book Group conversations not only provided a means of analyzing girls’ issues of personal identity, but also offered a glimpse into the ways in which girls’ own discussions identified and either reinforced or resisted dominant social discourse about issues associated with femininity such as physical appearance, romantic relationships, sexuality, marriage, and power. Girls’ conversations reflected attempts at resistance of
dominant discourse regarding some of these issues. However, many of their conversations “took up” or reinforced limiting notions of femininity, including associating thinness and prettiness with happiness and acceptability, viewing their sexuality as something they “give” to boys, and emphasizing and building up traditional notions of romantic love. In addition to what they did discuss, the absence of narratives or tales of female agency, desire, and power are also telling and reinforce common social messages about hegemonic femininity.

Still, even though resistance and social critique was not consistent across all topics and all girls, it does offer interesting possibilities for discussion based groups as a method for critical reading and reflection regarding social issues that affect and often limit, girls’ own sense of power and identity. Book Group was a forum where girls could begin to discuss and confront issues related to them as young women and where they were able to begin to question and challenge limiting notions of what it is to be a woman in society today. Girls definitely challenged cultural and textual messages that suggested women and girls were “less than” men and boys and argued that women deserved equitable treatment and social and cultural power. Although a critic of reader response theory, Marnie O’Neill (1993) suggests that literary response strategies such as literature circles and literature based discussions and other methods of personal responses may be used to promote a culturally critical perspective regarding literature where readers are able to resist traditional discourses and “positioning” and take up “an oppositional stance” (p. 21); however, she believes different interventions and functions within these strategies may be necessary to help promote this oppositional or critical stance (O’Neill,
1993). I am left wondering what better sorts of interventions I might have designed to help promote a more culturally critical perspective in our Book Group discussions.

Because of my chosen role in Book Group as “one of the girls” and a participant-observer, rather than a facilitator, I often chose not to intervene in conversations where girls’ talk reinforced notions of hegemonic femininity. When girls asserted information that I found directly false or damaging to girls’ safety, I would often gently correct the information. (For example, Sydney’s assertion that you could catch gonorrhea from kissing or the idea that girls have to “pay” for losing their virginity.) When I reviewed and reread transcripts, I also realized that I would sometimes ask girls leading questions to lead them to a more critical viewpoint or to challenge an issue from the texts. (This happened in our discussion of the double standards men and women face regarding weight and appearance; I asked the girls if they thought it was realistic that Lara’s boyfriend stays with her once she gains a huge amount of weight.) I often asked these questions unconsciously, and only reflected on how I’d intervened later when I was transcribing a Book Group discussion. In Chapter Six, I discuss further the issues of how a different role on the part of the adult facilitator or other interventions such as O’Neill (1993) describes might help better “nudge” girls towards a more critical viewpoint.
CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to offer a glimpse into the experience of what Book Group came to mean to one small group of adolescent girls. This study highlights the experiences of nine girls in an after-school literature based discussion or as we dubbed it, “Book Group,” where we met weekly for a three month period to read young adult literature that featured issues of the body commonly considered to be of concern to adolescent girls. My initial research question focused on the ways in which girls described their experiences in Book Group and what these experiences came to mean to them during our time together.

Book Group became a “space” separate from other areas of the girls’ lives; it offered them something that they found lacking in other areas, especially traditional, schooled spaces. This group also offered a place for girls in what Moje (2002) calls an “in-between space.” The girls met after-school, within the environment of the school setting, reading literature designed for young adults. Yet at the same time, Book Group connected to out-of-school interests and concerns of these girls and incorporated a social atmosphere and fostered discussion on areas outside of those usually discussed in school, providing a “transformational,” “hybrid” space (Moje, 2002). This chapter will provide an overview of my findings from the three main research questions addressed in the study. Additionally, I will discuss implications from this study and discuss how they
contribute to the literature on issues such as girls’ literacy studies, adolescent literacy instruction, and theories of embodied identity as they relate to adolescent girls. Finally, I will address and recommend further areas of research to build upon the theory and findings of this study.

The Experience of Book Group

Girls described the experience of Book Group in four main ways—as a space to “hear and be heard”; as a warm, safe space; a space to read “naturally;” and a space separate from boys. Girls joined Book Group to have a place to “hear and be heard”—they wanted to hear what other girls had to say about books and issues that they held in common. Research shows that adolescence is commonly a time of self-silencing and disassociation for adolescent girls (Gilligan, 1993).

Book Group included girls who considered themselves shy, quiet, and several of whom stated they found it very difficult to speak in classroom situations. I had known many of these girls as former students in my language arts classroom; none of them were as outspoken and talkative in class discussions as they were in Book Group. Carolina and Sydney displayed remarkably different personalities and levels of sharing in Book Group; I cannot recall a single time either of these girls voluntarily spoke in the language arts classroom unless called upon. They both admitted that classroom situations and class discussions were “scary” and “intimidating” to them. In their words, the small, intimate nature of Book Group offered them chances to be heard, to speak up, and to share in ways that they were unable to in other settings. The participants described this process as enjoyable and empowering.
Small group settings allowed girls in Book Group to find their voice; to feel they could speak. They were able to listen to other adolescent girls and learn that their experiences and feelings were not unique. Powerful moments occurred in Book Group when girls admitted that they had been to counseling and realized that other members had been through similar situations. Topics as innocent and simple as feeling like they would never be kissed were shared by multiple group members; through these experiences a setting of trust and confidence grew. Girls were able to realize that they were not alone in their feelings and experiences, but also girls were able to listen to and respect others, even when their opinions and experiences differed from their own. This helped create what the girls described as a “warm,” “safe,” and “trusting” environment of Book Group.

That being said, not all of the girls shared as fully in the experience of Book Group as others. Some like Felicity and Melissa rarely spoke; Melissa especially was difficult to engage in discussions and group dynamics. She was also the only participant I was unable to obtain an exit interview with, perhaps she was not as comfortable with me as the other girls as she was a “no show” for our one-on-one interview. Even Maria, who said the Book Group was a “safe spot” for her, illustrated her reluctance with Book Group discussions; when her best friend, Carolina was unable to attend Book Group one week due to a makeup French test, Maria skipped Book Group as well. For some girls the Book Group seemed more transformative than for others; the short period of time we met together (12 weeks) may not have been enough time for more reluctant girls to fully feel comfortable in the setting of Book Group.

Despite the fact that some girls participated less in Book Group, they all still reported it as a positive experience and one which they would like to engage in again.
The small group nature of Book Group and its space outside of the classroom context may be at the heart of what made it transformative for some participants; Finders’ (1994) research into adolescent girls’ literacies concluded that truly “safe” spaces for literacy sharing are almost impossible in classroom settings due to the issues of gender, power, and politics at play in school classrooms. The Book Group became an important space for the girls in this study as it offered them a space they weren’t getting in other aspects of their lives—especially their lives at school. The girls complained bitterly during social times and during Book Group discussions about the literature they were assigned to read in their courses, especially their language arts classes. I cannot begin to recount the number of times one of the girls complained about a specific title such as *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Animal Farm*. Girls felt that the books they read in school were disconnected from their lived experiences as adolescent girls—they wanted to read books that connected to their lives and spoke to them as young women.

Girls reported loving young adult literature and contemporary realistic fiction—yet they seldom had opportunities to read this type of literature in their high school classrooms. Also, girls felt they rarely got the chance to read about girls and female protagonists in their required readings. They had little faith that teachers knew what sorts of books they even liked to read. When I asked the girls if they would join a book group next year if another language arts teacher at the school revived the girls’ Book Group, Carolina said, “You know the good books and you brought them. I don’t know if a lot of English teachers read those books. You need someone who knows the books, right?” (Carolina, exit interview, 5/9/07).
In addition to reading literature they found “boring” and irrelevant, girls were largely unhappy with the pedagogical practices of their language arts classes. Literature and reading there was not “natural” in the girls’ words; they had come to associate the reading they did in school with dreaded practices such as text annotations, packets and dittos, vocabulary words and quizzes and literary analysis essays. They reported little to no opportunities for discussion based response to literature; the methods they encountered in most of their language arts classes were formalist in nature and encouraged the memorization of literal plot points in addition to literary analysis. What the girls described reflects what research on adolescent literacy tells us; literacy instruction in many high schools today offers little opportunities for authentic, discussion based means of responding to literature, despite the fact that these methods are linked to higher student achievement (Applebee et al, 2003; Langer et al, 2003).

These were girls who described themselves out of school as avid readers; yet they clearly disliked and sometimes avoided or resisted their school-related reading. Even when they did enjoy a text chosen as a required reading for language arts class, they found the assignments that accompanied the reading largely dampened their enthusiasm for the actual reading and literature. Many of the girls said they had gradually begun reading less and less as school related reading had made them less enthusiastic readers overall.

I was surprised by how much girls relished this “girls only” space of Book Group. Girls often reported choosing to join Book Group because it was a “girls only” space. They felt this opportunity to read, talk, and share away from boys was crucial to the experience of Book Group; many said they would not have joined if the group had
included boys as well. They felt that having a space only for girls provided them with opportunities to speak more freely and to also choose books that they thought held important themes for them as adolescent girls, without worrying about boys thinking these were “chick books” (Bethany, exit interview, 5/10/07).

Girls’ Reading Identities

The girls in this study all self identified as readers, something that not all adolescents would naturally do, but then this study took place in a voluntary after-school reading group for girls. Girls who were not readers likely would not be attracted to such an after-school activity. Indeed, the girls in the group were all actively reading, some only for school-related assignments; however many read frequently and widely outside of school. All of the girls reported reading at least an hour a night, some saying they read as much as they possibly could in their spare time. The girls defined readers as those who read for “fun,” “enjoyment” and “pleasure.” Readers chose to spend their spare time reading rather than engaging in other common adolescent activities such as watching television, hanging out with friends, or playing games or other electronic activities. According to these parameters, all of the girls in the study were most definitely readers.

I came to think of the girls as not only readers but as “book people.” The girls responded to the physical entities of books in positive and sentimental ways. They were excited to be reading brand new books and to be the first to read the books. They talked about the quality of the books—they preferred hard covers and the matte-finish and larger size of trade paperbacks. They disliked what they saw as the cheapness of mass market paperbacks. They discussed with some derision the tattered nature of books they often
received in school. I remembered the taped up copies of novels I often had to offer my students—new books are rare in public schools. I loved the year I started at a brand new high school and could offer all of my students brand new books. In many language arts classrooms, students never even see actual novels or trade books; all of the literature study comes from anthologies and textbooks.

This affinity for books, for the feel of the crispness of paper as a page turns in the hand or the feel of opening a tightly bound cover that has yet to be read, described the important of the physical nature of reading for the participants. As avidly as they responded to the new, pristine books they were offered for Book Group, they did not share the same affinity for other forms of reading, such as electronic sources. The girls said they were not “computer people.” The use of an online blog as an extension and supplement to our weekly meetings failed to interest or excite the girls in the study; the blog was barely used. When asked about it, most of the participants admitted that they didn’t care to spend much time online and they didn’t enjoy electronic forms of reading and writing. Although much research in adolescent literacy and new literacies suggests that alternate forms of reading and writing appeal highly to adolescent readers (Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Moje et al, 2000), this was not true for the girls in this group. Admittedly, the girls in this group are not necessarily representative of all adolescents, nor are any of them reluctant or struggling readers, who much of the research on multiple literacies is targeted towards. However, as a “book person” myself I find it important to note that literacy researchers should not be quick to discount the continued importance of books and young adult literature for adolescents today.
Girls' Sense of Gendered Identity

Although the primary focus of my research concerns itself with adolescent literacy and literature based practices and instruction, another important aspect of this study dealt with issues of gender and their impact upon adolescent identity and development. This Book Group was a girls only space—it was concerned with exploring how girls' experiences in an after-school literature based discussion might provide a space for them to discuss their own embodied, gendered experiences as adolescent girls. Through their conversations, girls explored their situated identities as adolescent females today. Young adult literature dealing with aspects of the body of concern to adolescent girls was the focus for our discussions, but girls also used the discussion of the books as a means to explore and examine their own experiences as adolescent girls and to explore what it means to be an adolescent girl in society today. Girls' talk in Book Group and their personal responses and connections to the literature were analyzed; my interpretations produced several main cultural themes about their understandings of what it meant to be a girl. These “ways of being” included topics such as friendship, body issues, personal issues and concerns, being in junior high, responsibility for others, and the importance of being nice.

Girls own narrated tales of being a girl revealed that for many of them, their lives as adolescent girls are what I would term as tumultuous and turbulent. They describe continually seeking to negotiate multiple demands from friends, boyfriends, parents, and teachers. They report feeling conflicted and uneasy about their own sense of self, while struggling to find balance between friendships and romantic relationships. Other girls felt despair and disappointment at not having a romantic relationship with a boy and to
losing their friends who did become involved with boyfriends. They often swallowed their opinions and fears to preserve relationships at all costs, which is consistent with what Brown & Gilligan (1992) report about adolescent girls’ needs to preserve relationships and keep them free from conflict. Girls discussed the importance of young women forming themselves into the role of being “nice” and a “nice girl.” Again, feminist research illustrates how social discourse surrounding adolescent girls reinforces the notions that the ideal girl is “nice, kind and helpful” (Walkerdine, 1990). In addition, girls spoke of naturally taking on the caregiver role in their relationships with boyfriends, family members, and younger children. These care-giving roles often extended into other areas of girls’ lives, as research suggests that even in the classroom girls take on the policing and care-giving role of being maternal and taking care of their male classmates (Finders, 1997).

Their bodies and their appearance seemed to be of utmost concern to the girls in Book Group; they all listed issues of weight, beauty, and body image as the most important topic of concern for adolescent girls. All of the girls in Book Group at one point or another expressed negative feelings, emotions, or insecurities about their own bodies or appearance. Their descriptions of their own bodies and their views about their own appearance and sense of attractiveness were overwhelmingly negative and critical, reflecting what research tells us about girls’ difficulties with accepting and embracing their own bodies and sexuality (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1990, 1995; Tolman, 2003, 2006).

Although statistics reveal that many high school girls are sexually active, the girls in Book Group had strong feelings about early sexual behavior and most of the girls in
Book Group were sexually inexperienced. The two girls who admitted to having had sex in the past both described how much they regretted the decision and how they felt they had entered into sexual activity for the wrong reasons, mainly to save or improve a relationship with a boyfriend. Their own sexuality seemed to be a source of "dilemma" (Tolman, 2002) for many of the girls. In addition to inexperience with sex, many of the girls also carried misinformation or a lack of critical knowledge about important sexual topics such as sexually transmitted diseases and birth control, despite having all taken a mandated health course at the high school level.

The girls in Book Group disclosed stories of troubled lives and troubled pasts. I was initially inspired by the voices of "real girls" in Taylor et al’s (1995) research with at-risk girls in their Understanding Adolescents Study. Here, they worked over three years with a group of twenty-six girls they deemed to be "at risk." Although initially I would not have considered the girls in my study to be "at risk"—they are all honors students, they are all regularly attending school, after my time with them I came to wonder if just by being adolescent females, are they at risk? The Book Group girls may not be at risk of dropping out, but they certainly have been at risk for many other things—self harm through cutting, suicide attempts, drug use, etc. They are at risk in their relationships with boys as they have learned to "play nice" to fulfill romantic scripts they have adopted from popular culture. They are at risk of becoming voiceless, silenced, and disassociated from their feelings and desires (Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al, 1995). These girls used Book Group as a place to share these stories of all the ways they were at risk and had put their bodies at risk through dangerous and self-abusive practices. Continued research into means of supporting and giving voice to
adolescent girls’ thoughts, doubts, and concerns seems vitally important. If the girls in this study are any indication, high performance in school often can mask girls who are still at-risk.

The issue of junior high as a time of great trouble and near torture was a reoccurring theme in many of our Book Group discussions. Girls described junior high as a “hellish,” “freakish” and “horrible” experience. Here is where many of the girls began their self-destructive behaviors such as self-harming, drug use, and suicide attempts. I too have lived through junior high and like most grown women, I remember my own junior high years with pain and loathing some twenty years later. Ways of offering positive support systems to adolescents during these critical years of early adolescence seems vitally important. Girls described how specific teachers or school counselors were instrumental during their junior high years as systems of support and encouragement; small group support systems at the junior high level could offer much towards easing this painful time.

Although many of the facets of identity girls discussed in Book Group do not tie directly into literacy studies or experiences with literature; gendered (and raced, classed, etc.) identity still has important ramifications for literacy education (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Sutherland, 2002). Identity matters and is integrally tied to literate practices such as reading and writing, as reading is “lived through experience” (Rosenblatt, 1976). As literary theories including reader response theory and critical literacy underpin this study, examining and acknowledging the identities of participants is essential to beginning to understand the experiences they describe within Book Group and within larger educational and literacy oriented settings. Moje & MuQaribu (2003) describe
"experience-based pedagogy" as literacy pedagogy such as reader response and critical based pedagogies, which call upon students to read and write from their own experiences as well as examine and critique how their individual experiences are situated within historical and social confines. Thus, students’ gendered, classed, raced, sexualized and embodied identities are integrally tied to literature study and response.

Girls’ Readings of Discourses about Femininity

Finally, Book Group was a place where girls were able to discuss and sometimes challenge limiting notions of what it is to “be a girl” in society today. This seems especially powerful and important for adolescent girls, as women are continually marked by what Wanda Pillow (2002) describes as intersecting discourses of power, class and gender. In particular, adolescent females are surrounded by social discourse that suggests that adolescent female sexuality is dangerous and must be subdued (Fine, 1988; Pillow, 2006; Tolman, 1994, 2006). The readings we did all tied to issues of the body; although girls did not always pick up the “body” as a topic, they did discuss important gendered discourses around body image, sexuality, femininity, romance, and family. Examining such issues offers powerful spaces for what Pillow (2003) describes as a feminist genealogy, as girls begin to refigure “conceptualizations of bodies, power and knowledge” (p. 146).

In their discussions of the young adult literature we read, girls not only discussed issues and social discourses as they related to their own personal identities, but also described larger social discourses about issues associated with femininity such as physical appearance, romantic relationships, sexuality, and marriage. Girls’
conversations reflected attempts at resistance of dominant discourse regarding some of these issues. In these discussions about social and cultural messages regarding how girls should act, behave, and look, girls were often able to recognize the limiting nature of what social discourse offers to girls and women. Although girls’ discussions sometimes reflected an acceptance or adoption of dominant social scripts regarding femininity, there were many occasions where the girls in the group, or at least certain members of the group, spoke out against these views of femininity, female sexuality, and issues related to the female body.

Issues and literature that deals with the body, gendered experiences, female sexuality and issues of power are rarely used in classroom settings. The Book Group provided these girls with opportunities to read, discuss, and critique social discourses that shape and affect their lives as young women and that reflect larger social themes about what is expected of all women in society. The girls reported that although they felt the topics in the literature we discussed were of utmost importance to most adolescent girls, that schooled spaces rarely give them chances to read about and discuss these issues. It was my hope that Book Group might become a means for girls to engage in critical thought and practice when presented with prevailing notions about femininity and gender.

Although girls’ responses in Book Group did include the sharing of personal stories and connections to texts, characters, and other events, they also used Book Group as a time for discussing and critiquing larger social issues and messages regarding sexuality, issues of the body and appearance, equity issues, the role of romance, marriage and family in their lives, and other social discourses that shape and frame their experiences as adolescent females. Girls also used their time together in Book Group to
not only listen to, but also to sometimes challenge, fellow readers’ stances, such as when other girls challenged Sydney’s reading of *Life in the Fat Lane*, when she argued that the only suitable “happy ending” for the main character was to lose weight.

**Implications for Research and Theory**

*Girls’ Literacy Studies*

Recent research into girls’ studies and girls’ literacy practices (Barbieri, 1995; Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997; Harper, 1998, 2000; Shultz, 1996) has illustrated how examining such practices not only offers insights into the ways that adolescent girls construct their literate and gendered identities, but also can provide valuable spaces where girls can feel comfortable sharing their voices and finding a space to “be heard,” something the girls in this study said they found to be an important aspect of their experience in Book Group.

Three main studies informed my research into girls’ literacy studies and my desire to explore a “girls only” space for high school readers to discuss young adult literature that connected to issues they found important as adolescent girls (Barbieri, 1995; Cherland, 1994; Finders, 1997). While all three of these studies examined schooled literacy practices within language arts classrooms, they also examined girls’ out of school literacies and the ways in which girls “took up” literacy practices outside of the classroom. The girls in my study seemed to have much in common with the “tough cookies” of Finders (1997) study. While girls in the Book Group often didn’t enjoy the literacy practices and the literature presented in their language arts classrooms, they largely conformed to school literacy practices, while complaining about them in outside
spaces such as Book Group. Also similarly to the tough cookies, many of the girls in
Book Group were silent voices in their language arts classrooms. They expressed the
inability to speak up, to voice their opinions in large group settings such as the classroom,
especially in their English classes where there were “over forty other kids and there’s just
no way to have your voice or opinions heard there” (Tammy, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Several of the girls who were former students in my classroom, spoke more in the
twelve weeks of Book Group than I had heard them speak in an entire year in my
language arts classroom. And literature circles and other discussion based strategies were
present in my classroom. The small nature of Book Group offered something that other
spaces, including language arts classroom couldn’t seem to. Finders’ (1994) study also
discussed the fact that the larger settings of literature classrooms are unable to produce
truly “safe” spots for sharing and discussion; girls too often feel constrained and
restricted by the gendered politics and issues of power implicit in classroom
relationships. An implication of this research then is that teachers, schools, and other
community resources need to examine ways in which small group settings such as the
after-school Book Group might be offered to adolescent girls.

In Hubbard et al’s We Want to be Known: Learning from Adolescent Girls
(1998), language arts teacher and researcher Maureen Barbieri describes how inspired by
Carol Gilligan’s (1993) arguments that adolescent girls need to develop strong, mentoring
relationships with their female teachers, she started an after school group for girls which
involved reading and writing as well as spaces for girls to talk about their lives and their
experiences. Spaces such as the Book Group of this study and the one created by
Barbieri seem to have powerful possibilities for offering meaningful, powerful literacy and social spaces to adolescent girls.

How many formal spaces are offered for adolescent girls to meet together in these ways? Although community spaces such as church groups and scouting organizations may offer options for girls to meet and interact socially with other adolescent girls, few of the girls in this study could think of other spaces separate from Book Group where they had opportunities to meet and discuss issues with other girls. In addition, such spaces are important opportunities for young women to engage in feminist discussion and practices, much the way our Book Group did, that can offer adolescent girls “knowledge of feminism along the way to adulthood” (hooks, 2000, p. 17).

The girls in Book Group described for the most part, home lives that did not offer a place for support or solace when dealing with the turbulence of their adolescent lives. Many of the girls had parents who were physically absent from the home; most of the rest felt that their parents were often emotionally absent from their lives. Discussion based forums such as Book Group can offer girls a place to go to discuss issues and troubles they are facing. Girls need adult mentors who can support them as they navigate the difficult terrain of adolescence (Gilligan, 1993; Taylor et al., 1995).

Throughout this study, my analytical memos reflected my conflict over my own role in Book Group. I wanted to be a participant-observer who could be “one of the girls,” and not a teacher or leader of the group. Although I was the only adult present and I did provide the weekly snacks and the actual books, I wanted to be a “part” of the group as much as possible rather than appearing as the “leader.” In my analytical memos, I expressed internal conflicts regarding my own role, wondering whether or not my
questions and participation in Book Group were still too “teacher-like.” I often asked the girls leading questions when conversations lulled; it was hard for me to divorce myself from years of being a teacher—it was a role I seemed to fall into naturally. In their exit interviews though, the girls describe how they perceived me as anything but teacher-like in Book Group. Bethany’s comments were powerful to me and reverberate with me even now. “You put yourself in our shoes pretty much, you were just another girl, someone who knew how to be a girl. Who had been there and was still there, if that makes sense” (Bethany, exit interview, 5/10/07).

Bethany’s comments reinforce what I see as one of the primary implications of this research—girls need spaces where grown women can offer them opportunities to “hear and be heard,” and who can also help them know that other women have experienced, and survived, many of the same struggles they now face. Girls need positive, discussion based spaces such as this Book Group with “women who are willing to speak from their own experiences with girls...who are willing to share their own pitfalls and triumphs in relationships, with family members, and especially with boys and men” (Taylor et al, 1995, p. 131). To me, literature based spaces such as Book Group seem natural ways to facilitate what Taylor et al describe, as reading becomes a way of knowing and reading the world (Freire, 1970).

One of the main issues or themes that connects through Finders’, Cherland’s, and Barbieri’s studies is the issue of gender and how girls’ responses to literature and literacy practices are impacted by the presence of boys in the classroom. Finders (1997) describes how both the “tough cookies” and the “social queens” of her study were unwilling to give true readings and literary responses in the presence of boys. One of the
girls who originally begins writing about her beliefs in women’s liberation and the
women’s movement stops once she is ridiculed by boys in the classroom. She ceases to
share her writing after this experience. Cherland (1994) describes how junior high girls
in literature based discussions (similarly organized to the Book Group of this study) are
hindered from responding fully in literature discussions because they are all but drowned
out by the voices and demands of boys in the groups. Barbieri’s study (1995) begins in
an all girls’ school, and describes the powerful and meaningful responses the girls in her
classroom make as she teaches for critical consciousness. When Barbieri’s classroom
suddenly also contains male students, she is dismayed by the ways in which boys in the
classroom seem to demand all of her time and attention and the ways in which girls
silence and stifle their voices and literary responses.

These issues of gender and how it plays out in literacy classrooms strongly
connect to the ways in which girls in Book Group described the importance of the “girls
only” space it offered. Book Group became a powerful space for them as it was a space
separate from boys. How many spaces do we offer to adolescents where they are able to
share their thoughts, concerns, and feelings in single-sex spaces? The only course
adolescents take in school that is separated by gender is physical education, although
largely only the locker rooms are separate; boys and girls join together for co-ed
classroom activities and sports. After school activities are also largely co-ed; only sports
teams are separated by gender.

An implication of this research then is the need for an exploration of ways girls
(and boys) can be offered spaces that are gender-specific, that allow a space to talk,
reflect, and wonder separately from the issues that seem to cloud and complicate
adolescents’ experiences with the opposite sex. Time and time again in Book Group, the girls in the study described how they found the space separate from boys gave them “voice” and many girls who barely spoke in their classes felt the power to speak up in a space separate from boys. Prior to this study, I had been firmly opposed to movements in education that have suggested and supported single-sex classrooms in public schools. I felt it was important for girls to learn to work, achieve, and learn next to their male peers. After all, I reasoned, these girls will go on to universities, workplaces, and relationships where they will need to be able to hold their own with and against boys and men. However, after looking at the sense of comforting space apart from boys that the girls discussed in the study, I can’t help but believe that public schools do need to find spaces where girls (and boys in turn) can feel free to talk, to think, to share separately from the issues they associate with the opposite gender.

As a language arts teacher myself, Barbieri’s (1995) descriptions of the ways in which she worked with her students to teach for critical consciousness and critical literacy through their classroom reading and writing practices was inspiring. Barbieri clearly describes her own pedagogical and theoretical frameworks for English education; she sees literacy practices as offering powerful opportunities to address and combat issues of oppression and limiting social discourses relating to gender, race, and class. Her classroom instruction contains many of the elements I sought to bring together in Book Group, elements that I had not been as fortunate as Barbieri to fully embrace within the constraints of my position as a public school teacher in the current political and educational climate. These included the use of young adult literature that contained issues that appealed to adolescent readers, especially adolescent girls as well as
“experience based” (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003) methods of responding to literature that incorporate students’ lived experiences into their literature responses.

Another implication of this research then is that schools and language arts teachers in particular, need to be receptive to the inclusion of young adult literature in the curriculum. Teachers and librarians need to be knowledgeable about the vast amount of quality fiction that exists under the genre of young adult literature. Young adult literature offers girls powerful opportunities to see their interests and their experiences reflected in what they read, study, and discuss. Young adult literature is also one of the few places where girls are able to read about adolescent females who are portrayed as strong, complex sexual beings (Younger, 2003). Unfortunately, despite its popularity, young adult literature is often still dismissed by many language arts teachers as fluff; their lack of knowledge of the genre often leads them to discount its complexity, sophistication, and the depth and breadth of topics featured. Several of the girls said that Book Group had “reawakened” their love of reading through the novels we read together. For example, Tammy who had read over 100 books during her freshman year of high school (while in my language arts class) had only read two books during sophomore year for her own personal reading. As Tammy explained:

So it was like a drastic, drastic drop and I was really glad to get back into it. And I want to keep reading. Oh my gosh, I found out they have a third God Don’t Like Ugly book. And the first two were like amazing, oh my God. Like I have to read that. I’m kind of back into books (Tammy, exit interview, 5/9/07).

Limiting, formalist, “banking model” (Freire, 1970) approaches to literature instruction are damaging to the creation and sustainment of life long readers (Amrein &
Berliner, 2002; Madaus, 1998). Adolescents rarely get opportunities in schooled spaces to read in real life ways and for real life purposes. The girls' reactions to their schooled experiences with literature has clear implications for classroom teachers; adolescents need opportunities to read naturally and openly, to have opportunities to have their individual voices heard and validated, to look at literature and texts as open to multiple meanings and interpretations rather than boiled down to fodder for vocabulary words and plot analysis. They need opportunities to read young adult literature that discusses themes that are meaningful and relevant to them. Young adult literature is not only pleasurable reading for high school students (Cart, 1996), it offers, as our Book Group discussions illustrate, powerful opportunities for encouraging reflective, critical readings (Alsup, 2003; Bean & Moni, 2003; Brozo et al, 2002; Young, 2001; Younger, 2003).

The girls in Book Group had profound, thoughtful, and meaningful ways of responding to literature—they drew personal connections to texts and characters, responded to social scripts and discourses about issues of femininity, sexuality, culture, gender, and other important social issues. They spoke warmly of authors and texts, listened to other readers and expanded their own viewpoints. And yes, they spoke of the hallmarks of English class curriculum—literary elements, point of view, character analysis, and other important literary devices. They were exposed to new thoughts, new vocabulary, new authors, and new structures of writing—all without the inclusion of packets, vocabulary sheets or pop quizzes. There was no need to test the girls on the material covered in Book Group—they read for natural and authentic reasons. In short, when offered opportunities to engage with literature and offer not only efferent, factual readings of texts, but open themselves up to personal, aesthetic readings, these girls...
produced readings that illustrated theirs “ways of knowing” (Rosenblatt, 2005; Short, 1999) about themselves, the world around them, and the world of literature response in profound and powerful ways. Another implication of this study then is that teachers need to give students opportunities for autonomy and student-led discussion of literature; reader response inspired classrooms may not produce assignments that are as easily graded and quantified as vocabulary quizzes and worksheets on theme and plot; however, discussion based literature instruction provides for deep, meaningful, literary talk, including talk about elements common to language arts classrooms. Character analysis, discussion of theme and purpose, textual analysis, discussion of style and structure—all of these occurred in our Book Group discussions.

**Issues of the Body**

One of the main ways this study of girls’ literacy experiences and practices differs from the body of research literature on girls’ literacy studies is its examination and inclusion of literature that deals with issues of the body. Curriculum that focuses on issues of the body, including sexual identity is still rare (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003; Smith, 1999). While some may believe that bodies and sexual identities are inappropriate topics for high school classrooms and curriculum, adolescents are often socially and discursively defined by their bodily experiences of puberty (Lesko, 2001). In addition, research influenced by feminist, queer, and socio-cultural theories acknowledges that bodies are more than biological or fleshly entities; they are socially inscribed by issues of culture and power (Grosz, 1994; McWilliam, 2000; Pillow, 2002). These issues are of particular power and importance to adolescent girls as they are especially marked and
influenced by socially produced discourses about how female bodies should look and behave (hooks, 1990; Pillow, 2002; Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 2006).

Schools (and teachers) often attempt to avoid the difficult discussions and experiences surrounding adolescent females’ experiences with their embodied identity; I am again reminded of the colleagues I worked with at this particular research site who refused to teach books such as Speak (Anderson, 2000) for fear of discussing topics such as date rape. They didn’t want to have difficult conversations around issues of the body, even though adolescent girls are particularly aware of how their bodies shape and influence their day to day life experiences (Pillow, 1997; Tolman, 1994).

Within Book Group, we examined literature and discourses surrounding issues of the body. The girls’ discussions related to their bodies were so powerful and yet at the same time painful for me as a participant-observer. During these discussions more so than at any other point in the study, I was continually cognizant of my role as the adult female— the teacher, the mother, the experienced other. The conversations girls had about their own insecurities with their bodies were nothing new to me—I too had been an adolescent girl and I was still a woman in a culture that demands impossibly high standards of beauty for its women.

As I listened to the girls discuss their own struggles with their bodies—and with the abuse they had often inflicted upon their own bodies due to their feelings of aloneness, low self esteem, and self doubt, I again became convinced of the need for spaces for girls to go to talk about these issues with other girls, but also with educated, experienced women as facilitators. Spaces for this sort of talk, support, and education seem vitally important to the safety and well-being of adolescent girls.
As I often was during my tenure as a high school teacher, I was dismayed to see the amount of false information and the gaps in the knowledge girls had about sexuality. A clear implication from this research is that better education for young women about body issues is crucially important, especially with regards to issues such as contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Although schools currently offer classes such as health education, many girls are still carrying damaging notions about their own bodies and their sexuality; perhaps smaller, discussion based forums such as Book Group or non-literature based groups similarly to Oliver & Lalik (2001) suggest, could offer an important intervention and empowering sense of education for young women.

Although the girls in Book Group addressed issues related to the body such as the emphasis on physical beauty, weight issues, body image, and self harming, they also resisted fully identifying with and acknowledging the issues of the body that were a foundational piece of this research and the literature selections we read together. In their exit interviews, girls failed to identify “body issues” as being a central theme that tied our readings together even though I had been open about my interest in body issues for adolescent girls and all of the books I initially book talked with the girls focused on issues of the body. This was despite the fact that every girl in the group had listed “body issues” as the number one problem that girls today deal with on their introductory questionnaires. In addition, girls’ Book Group discussions often skirted around directly naming and addressing the actual body in the literature we read. Except for one discussion regarding the novel Sold in which girls describe their horror at the way the main character’s body is treated by the men who visit the brothel where she is held.
captive, the girls mainly avoided directly using the word “body” and addressing the actual bodies of characters in the texts we read.

I can only speculate on girls’ reasons for not tying our readings to issues of the body, especially considering how explicit I had been at the beginning of the study about my interest in bringing literature that dealt with issues of the body to adolescent girls. Girls’ avoidance of naming the body as being an important theme in our readings may reflect what some research describes as the importance of the social identity of the “good girl” and the “good girl reader” (Davis, 1993; Harper, 1998, 2000; Walkerdine, 2001). Good girl readers resist being embodied, which carries a connotation of sexual identity (Harper, 1998, 2000). Notions of hegemonic femininity demand a lack of agency in addressing the body, girls are discouraged from actively addressing agency in relationship to their own bodies and sexuality (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994, 2002, 2006).

*Spaces for Critical Literacy*

Another area this study explored was the potential for literature based discussions to foster and encourage critical perspectives in adolescent readers. The ways in which girls not only examined their own personal identities and experiences through literature discussion, but also examined larger social and cultural contexts that they saw within texts and their own readings of texts, provided powerful spaces for girls to move beyond what some critics of reader response theory describe as the “cult of the individual” (Pirie, 1997). The goal was to provide opportunities for girls to critique and challenge social discourses regarding issues related to gender and power (Mellor & Patterson, 2001, 2004; Sumara, 2002b).
However, the girls’ reading of texts and their own discussions of their sense of identity as adolescent girls leaves me with the realization that girls’ readings of texts and of the world around them often reinforced and reflected issues of hegemonic femininity and limiting notions of what it is to be a girl. Girls routinely accepted scripts that suggested they should play nice, take care of others, and that who they were as people was largely defined by their appearance and their sexuality. Of particular concern for me were girls’ readings of discourses surrounding sexuality and the body. Girls’ readings of plot events that involved sexual activity and/or character’s sexual identities often reinforced very limiting notions of female sexuality. Girls described their sexuality, in particular virginity, as “everything you have” and “every part (you) can possibly give.” They consistently avoided acknowledging that female sexual pleasure, desire, or agency could or should exist; they instead described only the psychological and emotional aspects of sexuality.

Perhaps most alarming though was the way in which girls described what they saw as the punitive nature of sexual activity and female sexual desire and agency. In their discussions of The First Part Last, the girls’ blog posts described how the main character must “pay” for having sex by not only getting pregnant, but ultimately losing her life. As Jamie comments, “This ending is scary because you realize that this is what can happen to you if you get pregnant. You can have sex and then you can pretty much be practically dead.”

Girls’ discussions of other issues related to romance and marriage also often reinforced what I saw as limiting notions of what it is to be a girl. Girls’ readings of texts and of the larger world in which they lived, often reflected rather than resisted notions of

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hegemonic femininity, which demands a lack of agency on the part of women, discouraging them from identifying themselves as sexual beings who may have wills and desires of their own (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994, 2002, 2006). The girls readings of texts reflected what Fine (1992) describes as the main discourses of female sexuality perpetuated in curriculum and schools today—sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, sexuality as individual morality, and what she terms “the missing discourse of desire.” While girls in Book Group were able to critique discourses that assigned shame and punishment to characters that had been sexually violated or victimized, such as those in the novel Sold, they had much more difficulty accepting any sort of discourse of desire present in the novels Dreamland and The First Part Last.

Although girls’ readings of dominant discourses surrounding issues of sexuality and femininity were disturbing to me as a feminist and as someone who has attempted to embrace critical pedagogy, I struggled with the level of intervention I should have in Book Group. In my desire to have Book Group be as girl-centered and non-schooled as possible, I limited my interventions in Book Group discussions and in the format of responses we shared. I did not push the issue of having girls make written responses to the texts when they initially resisted this. I also did not have pre-determined questions that I brought to Book Group discussions; I allowed girls’ interests and comments to guide the conversations. Although it was somewhat impossible for me as a feminist and a teacher not to occasionally argue a point or intervene when I saw girls reproducing false or limited readings of femininity, I often resisted the urge to correct girls or guide their conversations in ways that would have been more in line with critical, feminist thought.
Reflecting upon the transcripts of our time together, I am conflicted about my role in the process of Book Group. Although I feel that this “girls only,” girl-centered space was incredibly important to the participants, I also wonder how the girls’ conversations and consciousness might have been more critical had I pushed girls to ask more critical questions. Other research involving students’ reading and discussion of young adult literature has illustrated how pre-set reading prompts and questions can help guide high school students towards critical literacy, especially with regards to issues of gender and adolescent identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Brozo et al, 2002; Mellor & Patterson, 2001). Literature circles and similarly based literature discussions necessitate that teachers and adults are not the constructors of questions for discussion; however, I am left with the question of how I could have better equipped the girls to read critically without my taking over the Book Group and making the situation more formal and less student-run. I emphasized to the girls from the beginning of the experience that I wanted Book Group to be run by them, for them, and that I would not be making the formal decisions for the group.

However, a commitment to feminism and critical pedagogy necessitates the movement beyond encouraging girls’ voices to be heard. While critical literacy may look at education and the attainment of knowledge as a dialogic, reciprocal process in which both teachers and students learn from one another (Freire, 1970), at the heart of critical literacy is a praxis of action. As a researcher, these are questions I am still wrestling with, as I consider further research studies with adolescent readers.

Although girls’ readings of texts often reflected and reinforced notions of “being a girl” that conformed to dominant discourses of hegemonic femininity, such as the
importance of being nice, being pretty, and taking on maternal care-giving roles for others, the girls also illustrated incidences when they critiqued what they saw as textual themes or actions of characters that were dangerous, limiting, or destructive to girls and young women. Glimpses into their conversations reveal the beginnings of resistance to these notions and a speaking out on the part of the girls. Girls definitely challenged cultural and textual messages that suggested women and girls were “less than” men and boys and argued that women deserved equitable treatment and social and cultural power.

O’Neill (1993) suggests that literary response strategies associated with response-based theories such as reader response can be used to promote what she calls a culturally critical perspective regarding literature, while acknowledging that different interventions within these strategies may be necessary to help promote an oppositional or critical stance. One such method for future research with adolescent girls in literature discussions might involved more explicitly feminist texts. The literature we read in Book Group was well written, sophisticated, and engaging. Issues of the body common to adolescent girls were featured within the literature we read, which does have powerful implications for discussion and response. However, inclusion of other pieces (including young adult literature) in which bodies are presented as sources of empowerment rather than as problems might provide one method of pedagogical intervention towards encouraging a critical stance.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research has sought to fill gaps in current scholarship regarding adolescents’ descriptions of their experiences in literature based discussion groups. Continued studies
in adolescent literacy, girls’ studies, and adolescent identity that focus on the lived experiences of adolescents, that give voice and prominence to the actual words and experiences of adolescent girls are needed. Although all research is funneled through the interpretations of the researcher, the more fully we can come to understand adolescent girls’ experiences using their own words, their own voices, and their own narrated tales of identity, the closer we come to truly understanding the literate, gendered lives of adolescent readers.

Although much of the success and the uniqueness of Book Group for the participants in this study lies in the “in between space” (Moje, 2000) it provided for girls to engage in literacy activities separate from the constraints of typical classroom practice, it also has great implications for classroom teachers. My time in Book Group with these girls left me professionally and personally rejuvenated—to have such powerful literacy experiences with adolescents outside of schooled spaces may be a means for many language arts teachers to develop bridges between the world of adolescent identity and the world of classroom instruction. I spent an afternoon chatting with several of my former colleagues in the language arts department at this school one afternoon after Book Group had ended, raving about the girls in Book Group and our discussions. One of my colleagues wistfully commented how nice it must be to talk about literature with girls who “want to read it.”

Although Book Group was grounded in many of the tenets we already know about best practices for adolescent literacy (Alvermann, 2002; Alvermann et al, 1998; Bean & Readence, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; Luke & Elkins, 1998; Moje, 2002), I also know from my own experiences as a public school English teacher and as someone...
who taught in-service courses to English teachers in my school district as well as graduate courses for practicing teachers while at the university, that many of these best practices are not being taken up by classroom teachers and school districts, largely due to the political and social climate of education today. Book Group was a transformative space for the girls who participated; it was also a transformative experience for me as the facilitator and researcher, even though I have largely embraced literature based discussions and student centered pedagogy in the past. Perhaps finding such out of school spaces to interact with young adults might convince more educators of the power of opening up discussion based forums in their own classrooms. Researchers then have powerful opportunities to recruit classroom teachers as co-investigators and co-researchers in such “hybrid spaces” (Moje, 2002).

In addition, further research in discussion based forums as means for adolescent girls to discuss issues of their embodied identity and issues related to body image, weight issues, and appearance is needed. Oliver & Lalik (1999) illustrated how discussion based forums for such issues can work in health and physical education classes; studies where literature such as the novels read during our study are explored in other content-areas such as health studies or physical education is one suggestion for future research. Research into embodied and sexual identities and literacy practices, including sexual identities that explore notions of the body and sexuality beyond heteronormative experiences is also important.

An additional piece of research that this study did not fully incorporate, but that has interesting potential would be the inclusion of other forms of “text” that reflect discourses about femininity—such as women’s and teen magazines, advertisements,
commercials, movies and television programs, etc. Although this study was a “Book” Group, we easily could have incorporated other forms of text and media in our discussions.

Conclusion

McWilliam (2000) speaks of the seductive power of pedagogy to transform, empower, and enlighten. During my time with the girls in Book Group, we together found a space where our understandings of literature, of each other, and of the power of girls’ voices and thoughts came together in meaningful and I believe, transformative, empowering and enlightening ways. When Book Group ended, the girls and I were both disappointed to see each other go. They hoped I would be back the next fall for a new round of Book Group and I too, find myself wishing for more time with these girls. It is my sincere hope that another woman in the language arts department of that high school or within the community will take up this space of Book Group for adolescent girls. For me, as I prepare to move across several states to a new job in a new city, I know that this line of research is important to me and that I see a personal, a professional, and a researcher’s need to continue my work with young women in discussion groups.

My time with these girls gave me an important glimpse into their lives, their readings, their identities. It is my hope that their experiences and voices will help shape and form future research into girls’ literacies, girls’ studies, and girls’ identities. It is important research to be done, to examine the words and worlds of adolescent girls. While considerable research on the importance of literature discussion, literature circles, and other reader-oriented methods of response are cited as being powerful opportunities
for students to voice their own views within the classroom, ironically little of the research that has been done of these literature discussions and literature circles actually focuses on the voiced experiences of students (Alvermann et al, 1996; Evans, 2002). Recognizing and giving voice to students’ lived, embodied experiences in literature discussions could have powerful implications for research on adolescent identity, gendered identity, and literate identity.
YOUNG ADULT NOVELS “BOOK TALKED” FOR LITERATURE CIRCLES

- **Bennett, C. (1998).** *Life in the Fat Lane.* This novel describes the struggles of a beauty queen who develops a disease that causes her to gain weight. She struggles to deal with her new sense of identity and other’s reactions to her new body.

- **Mackler, C. (2003).** *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things.* This novel tells of tenth grade Virginia’s “Fat Girl Code of Conduct” which illustrates her own demoralized self image and body issues. She feels inadequate and judged by her peers and especially her mother, an adolescent psychologist.

- **Anderson, L.H. (2001).** *Speak.* Melinda must face her first day of high school as “outcast.” She busted a party over the summer and now none of her friends will speak to her. Through the course of the novel, we learn why Melinda is not able to “speak” the truth about what happened that night at the party.

- **Woodson, J. (1995).** *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This.* In this story of a very unlikely friendship between two girls, issues of race, class, sexuality collide in a poignant and powerful way.

- **Woodson, J. (1991).** *The Dear One.* 15-year-old Rebecca is pregnant and is sent to live with her mother’s college roommate and her 12-year-old daughter, Afeni. Afeni distrusts and resents Rebecca’s presence in their lives, seeing her as an “other.” Through the course of the novel, the two girls learn they share more than they thought they did. The novel also includes issues of discrimination based upon sexual orientation.

- **McCormick, P. (2002).** *Cut.* This story tells of the struggles of one girl to deal with her family’s dysfunction and her own issues of self doubt in healthier ways than “cutting” as an escape from the pain.

- **Hopkins, E. (2004).** *Crank.* In this semi-autobiographical novel, the author tells the tale of Kristina (based on Hopkins’ daughter) whose boyfriend convinces her one day to try meth or “crank.” Her downward spiral into addiction involves many issues of the body.

- **Dessen, S. (2000).** *Dreamland.* This is the story of sixteen-year-old Caitlin and her struggles with an abusive realtionship with a boyfriend.

- **Johnson, A. (2003).** *The First Part Last.* This story features teenage protagonists Bobby and Nia as they face an unplanned pregnancy and the choices it brings.

- **Dessen, S. (1998).** *Keeping the Moon.* When she is sent to spend the summer with an aunt she barely knows, one girl must struggle to accept herself and her feelings of self loathing surrounding her appearance and her body image.

- **McCormick, P. (2006).** *Sold.* Set in a rural village of Nepal, the story of young Lakshmi, whose stepfather sells her into prostitution and her struggle to endure the horrors she faces within an Indian brothel.
APPENDIX B

PRE-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

1) How much reading would you say you do on a daily basis?
2) What kinds of reading do you do not directly related to your school assignments?
3) Would you consider yourself “a reader”?
4) What sorts of subjects are usually covered in materials you read for school?
5) What are the differences (if any) between things you choose to read for “fun” and school reading?
6) What are some of the best books you’ve ever read?
7) Why did you love these books?
8) What are some issues you think most adolescent girls are very concerned with?
9) Are these issues covered in anything you read in school? Out of school?
10) How important do you think issues of the body are to teen girls?
11) How often are these issues discussed in school?
12) Where else in your lives, other than school, do you hear about these issues?
13) What are some topics you would really like us to read about in this group?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS—END OF STUDY

1) Why were you initially interested in joining book group?
2) What kept you coming each week—what was in it for you?
3) Do you feel like you did a lot of talking/sharing in book group?
4) Were you comfortable with your level of participation?
5) Throughout our time together, many group members disclosed or shared personal information in book group. Did you feel book group was a place you could share personal information? Why or why not?
6) We’ve read five books together in a fairly short period of time...how does this compare to your normal reading habits?
7) Was this experience different from other reading experiences you’ve had? (Such as reading in school or reading on your own?)
8) All of the girls in this group said they thought of themselves as “readers.” How would you describe someone who is a “reader”?
9) Did you see any themes or threads that tied the books we read together? Are these themes important to teenage girls?
10) We talked a lot in book group about what it’s like to be a girl, especially a teenaged girl. In your opinion, how accurately did the books we read illustrate what it’s like to be a girl today? Can you give some examples?
11) Was there a particular book that you felt you connected to more than the others? Why that book?
12) Was there a character that you especially connected to? Who? Why?
13) How might this group have been different if boys were involved?
14) Would you join a book group again?
15) If you were in another book group, what kind of leader would you want to have? How would you describe/how did you perceive my role in the book group?

NOTE: These questions were asked to all book group participants. In addition, individual girls were asked questions derived from my re-readings of the data sources for each girl. This was a means of member checking and clarification as well as an additional data source.
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