“LISTENING TO THEIR VOICES:” A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF URBAN GIRLS’ EXPERIENCES IN AN ARTS-BASED GIRLS PROGRAM

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to work with an existing organization, and the group of girls it served, to develop and evaluate an arts-based program/curriculum. The curriculum was designed to help the girls express themselves in healthful ways, bolster resiliency, and build on their strengths in a safe environment. The research questions focused on how the girls experienced the expressive activities and whether or not they learned to express themselves through the use of arts in the program. A participatory action research approach was used; therefore, researchers were also the program leaders. Program evaluation occurred through: the analysis of interviews conducted before and after the group began and ended; researchers’ process notes written at the conclusion of each session; and journal entries made by the girls. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Process notes and journals supplemented the themes found in the interviews. The evaluation’s major finding: Expressive activities were a critical element of the program for the girls. Many indicated that through the activities they had learned valuable coping skills, had improved relationships with girls inside of the group, and found an avenue to express feelings and thoughts that they had not typically been able to express. The girls emphasized the importance of having fun and just “being kids” within an all female program. Additionally, having a choice in how to express their individuality was another important finding that emerged. Given the intense test-driven climate of schools, this study has important implications for future practice. Future programs should include a variety of expressive activities for youth, should allow for youth to express their individuality, and should create same-sex groups.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter includes a description of the problem, rationale for why it is considered a problem, and the purpose of the research study. The research questions, theoretical framework, and operational terms that guided the research are also introduced.

Background of the Problem

Until recently, the mental health field focused primarily on the needs and concerns of adults. At one time, the difficulties of adolescence were dismissed as transitional problems that would naturally be overcome. While strides have been made in researching and working with adolescents, there are underserved subgroups under the larger umbrella of adolescence. Minority youth within the United States—defined as African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians—are at even greater risk than non-minority youth. This is especially true when minority status is combined with poverty, community violence, single parent families, and poor housing conditions (Horowitz, 2005; Kazdin, 1993).

Among the experiences that are unique to urban youth and have a potentially negative impact on them is the significant amount of exposure to violence. Exposure to violence is associated with an increase in self-reported internalized problems, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), aggression, and a teacher-reported decrease in academic ability. Because of the intensity and consistency of exposure, the post-traumatic stress disorder that young people experience is most similar to war PTSD. Many of these youth report that they do not have a safe, supportive forum to share their feelings (Horowitz, McKay, & Marshall, 2005; Kiser, 2006; E. Ozer, 2005; E. J. Ozer & Weinstein, 2004).
Additionally, while both adolescent girls and boys experience tumultuous changes during this developmental stage, research indicates that adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to depression as well as a loss of self-esteem and confidence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Kazdin, 1993; Orenstein, 1994; Sillitti, 2004). Girls are two times more likely to have depression than boys the same age. Girls’ susceptibility to depression, anxiety, body image issues, and peer pressure has been associated with an increase in use of marijuana, alcohol, and other substances. Researchers conjecture that girls use more substances as a way to combat their emotional issues (Girls and Drugs, 2006).

At particular risk are urban girls who often contend with poverty and violence in addition to racism and sexism. Urban girls are more likely than non-urban girls to become pregnant in their teens or involved with drugs, or to fail or drop out of school (Augustine, Alford, & Deas, 2004; Way, 1995). At one time, body image issues and eating disorders were considered a white middle-class problem, however, research indicates that African American and Latina girls now report dissatisfaction with their bodies and an increased rate of disordered eating (Nicholson, Collins, & Holmer, 2004).

Urban minority girls also contend with a number of issues related to sexual development, pressure, and expectations. Some researchers argue that girls (in general) are socialized to deny their sexual desires and pleasures, whereas boys are taught to conquer them. Rather than reporting that they engage in sex for pleasure, urban minority girls are more likely to report that they have sex to keep up with their friends, to keep a boy around, or because of peer pressure in a group setting. Sexual experimentation begins between the ages of 12 and 14, and it appears that this is more likely due to pressure versus desire (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003).
Despite the societal stress and pressure, research indicates that African American girls maintain a stronger sense of self during their adolescence but struggle more academically. On the other hand, as compared to Caucasian and African American girls, Latina adolescents suffer the greatest loss of self-esteem between the ages of 9 and 15 (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2005; Orenstein, 1994).

It is essential to be aware of and address the many issues that urban girls face, but it is also important to be aware of their strengths. When researchers and practitioners work with urban girls using a deficit-based model, although well intentioned, the deficit-based model shows this population that adults have low expectations for them. Positive youth development (PYD), conversely, is a strength-based approach to working with urban youth and is currently underutilized in program development and research (Lerner, Phelps, Alberts, Forman, & Christiansen, 2007).

Due to budget constraints, school programs are being cut in both suburban and urban school systems. As a result, many youth do not have an opportunity to participate in expressive activities such as art, music, or drama (Mckelvey, 2003). Artistic expression is important for all youth’s creative and intellectual development. The absence of in-school enrichment will have the greatest impact on youth whose parents are unable to fund private out-of-school enrichment activities.

*Statement and Significance of the Problem*

Urban adolescent youth experience a number of unique struggles in their environments and have few safe spaces to express their concerns or to discover and build on their strengths. School is supposed to be a safe place for them to develop and a place where they can confide in adults, yet too often adolescents are silenced in school by rules, regulations, gender expectations,
and stereotypes. Because school no longer serves as a safe place to talk, young people often look to other organizations to meet these needs (Dimitriadis, 2005; Gilligan, 1992; Nicholson et al. 2004).

Not only do schools fail to serve as a safe place for youth to talk, but the quality of education in urban centers is often sub par in comparison with suburban schools. Most often urban schools, which usually serve economically disadvantaged students, are the last to be effected by school reform movements. A potential result of this education disparity is that minority youth are the most highly represented in remediation, vocational, and special education programs. They are also the most underrepresented in gifted and talented and enrichment programs. The high school dropout rate is much higher in urban areas, an issue of added concern considering the decline in low skilled jobs available in today’s economy (Cotton, 2001; C. McCarthy, et al., 2005).

Note that in the urban school where the Strong Links program and study took place, the school’s website indicates that out of 651 students, 26.7% are African American and 64.4% are Hispanic (BPS, 2007).

In addition to educational disparities, urban families face other challenges. The city of Boston’s report on crime statistics is encouraging in that the total crime decreased from 2007 to 2008. Despite the decrease, crime clearly remains a problem. For instance, from January 1 through July 20, 2008, there were 771 cases of larceny, 379 cases of aggravated assault, and 210 attempted or actual vehicle thefts reported in one area of Boston where the youth in the study live (Part one crime reported by the Boston Police Department by Offense and by District/Area, 2008). Added to crime are economic struggles. For instance, a report completed by the mayor’s
office cited that more than 50% of families living in a district of Boston, where many of the girls reside, make an income of less than $50,000 per year (Menino, 2006).

Within the urban environment, urban adolescent girls are at particular risk. A surge of research took place in the 1990s on adolescent girls’ development; however it seems that the number of researchers who continue to study this area has declined. There is an increased awareness of the problems that many urban girls experience, but according to Way (1995), white, middle- and upper-class girls have been the subjects of most of the research that has focused on how girls talk about their experiences. Consequently, many of the theories that came out of the 1990s do not reflect the experiences of urban minority girls. Most of the research that does talk about urban minority adolescent girls also is written from a deficit perspective. And, despite the increase in attention to adolescent girls’ development, urban minority adolescent girls remain an underserved group in both research and practice.

Because of the lack of attention given to urban minority adolescent girls, programs for middle school girls are greatly needed. Middle school is a difficult developmental period marked by a loss of nurturance from school professionals and by major changes in self. Further, middle school age girls are especially vulnerable because of emotional changes, stemming from puberty, that often result in behavioral changes (Nicholson, et al., 2004; Sillitti, 2004). Unfortunately, programs designed specifically for culturally diverse, urban adolescent girls are becoming increasingly rare. In Boston, where this study occurred, youth programming has turned to co-educational out-of-school time activities. Such programs serve more youth, but they fail to address the needs of girls, especially those who tend towards internalizing rather than externalizing their thoughts and feelings. Way’s (1995) study points to the current problem in Boston’s programming, as funding and support for all-female out-of-school time activities is
now being drastically reduced (Wheeler, Oliveri, Towery, & Mead, 2005). Although the Strong Links program and study took place during school, the curriculum is non-academic and can be used in an after-school setting.

A study on Boston’s after-school programs indicates that fewer girls are represented in after-school programs – perhaps because girls have reported not feeling comfortable “being themselves” in co-educational settings. Currently, research is lacking on girls’ experiences in existing programs, on the benefits of single-sex programs, on what makes girls strong, and on ways to promote girls’ developmental assets (Nicholson et al. 2004; Scales & Leffert 2004; Wheeler 2005).

Too often, well-intending adults assume that they know the most pressing concerns, values, and desires of young urban women and implement programs without consulting the girls. Brown and Gilligan (1992) state:

We are also attuned to the ways in which institutionalized restraints and cultural norms and values become moral voices that silence voices, constrain the expression of feelings and thoughts, and consequently narrow relationships, carrying implicit or explicit threats of exclusion, violation, and at the extreme, violence (p. 29).

When adults implement programs without consulting the community involved, they are silencing the participants by failing to include them in the process (Cohen, 2005; Wheeler, et al., 2005). The silencing of girls’ voices can lead many to disconnect from school, adults, and peers. This can in turn lead to isolation and internalizing their sadness, fears, or anxieties. When girls are silenced, they lose their ability to stay true to their authentic self (Rogers, 2001). More importantly, they are unable to recognize and build on their strengths. Programs for girls need to incorporate girls’ strengths into their design and activities, encouraging them to build on their existing resiliency.
Research indicates that the most successful programs include the input of the youth they serve (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Cohen, 2005; Nicholson, et al., 2004). A number of excellent programs and curricula exist for youth such as “Owning Up,” Boys and Girls clubs, 4H, and TASC, but few of them begin with community needs assessments nor focus primarily on girls or on the strengths of the constituents (Kazdin, 1993; Trammel, 2003; Wheeler, et al., 2005; Wiseman, 2008). Some all-female programs use needs assessments, but many of those do not use the arts in their programs to bolster resiliency in the girls. Programs that incorporate the arts may be important for all girls, but they are especially indicated for those who have difficulty externalizing thoughts and feelings (Wheeler, et al., 2005). Whittier Street Health Center in Boston, Massachusetts created DecisionArts, an after-school violence prevention and mentoring program for inner city girls. This is an excellent example of youth programming that focuses on girls and incorporates the arts, but it lacks the initial needs assessment (Unknown, unknown).

**Purpose and Potential Benefits of the Study**

The development and evaluation of all-girls programming in urban settings is an important area of research that is not receiving enough attention. In addition, empowering girls to become a part of program development and evaluation of a new program are warranted and appropriate. The present study sought to address the addition of expressive interventions to a relational girls program. A program, Strong Links, was created and implemented. A semi-structured interview was used before the program began and after the program ended.

The primary purpose of this study was to work with an existing organization, and the group of girls that it served, to develop an all-female art-based program. Strong Links was designed to help the girls express themselves through the arts, bolstering resiliency and building on their strengths in a safe environment. The study was a feminist participatory action-oriented
and voice-centered relational approach to research, intended to form a supportive and mentoring relationship with the participants (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Nicholson et al. 2004). The participatory action-oriented research (PAR) approach allowed the researchers to participate actively in the program while also collecting data. The voice-centered relational approach allowed the girls to speak for themselves throughout the evaluation process. The community, including the staff in the partnering prevention program and the girls in the school, was invited to be involved in the development and implementation of the program. The purpose of using this approach was to integrate research with practice — evaluators could create a program that would best serve the needs of the community and that would develop the strengths of its participants (Fine, et al., 2003).

The initial design of the program was drawn from a small focus group. The participants indicated that they had an interest in the arts and in talking about relationships and life stressors (loss of friends, for example). Based on feedback from the focus group, the facilitators/evaluators designed a program that was supported by literature. (Please see Appendix B for specific information on research that guided the program design.) The expressive modalities used in Strong Links included, but were not limited to, art, drama, and writing activities. Although the facilitators/evaluators designed the overarching themes and activities, participant input guided the specifics of each week. The facilitator/evaluators recognized the need to be flexible with the girls and adapted the program to meet the girls’ needs or as indicated by the girls’ feedback. This was an important piece of program design because research indicates that the most successful youth programs involve youth in the development (Nicholson, et al., 2004).

The secondary purpose of this study was to evaluate the efficacy of the expressive interventions in the program and understand the girls’ perceptions of how expressive modalities
may or may not have helped them express themselves, cope with their life struggles, or grow and change. This study sought to add to the literature, as previous research has not used a PAR approach to understand the impact of art/expressive interventions in all-girls programming. The evaluator interviewed the girls before the program and after its completion to understand how they perceived their growth, change, and expression over time. Interviews included the girls’ art as a tangible way to talk about what the art-making process and their art product/outcome meant to them. The focus of the group was on building the girls’ strengths through interactive arts-based programming. The intent of this research study was not to generalize the findings to all urban minority adolescent girls, but to deeply understand the experiences of one group of girls from one particular program.

An evaluation of Strong Links determined whether this was an effective program for girls at this particular school. The findings cannot be generalized to universal populations; nevertheless, the results inform future practitioners who want to implement Strong Links. The findings contribute to knowledge about how to work with girls’ strengths despite their difficulties. Finally, this research hopes to add to the slowly expanding literature on urban adolescent Latina and African American girls’ development.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

A feminist theoretical approach guided the conceptualization of this project as many of the concepts were drawn from theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Annie Rogers. For instance, Gilligan, Brown, and Rogers speak to the underlying concept that guided the “Listening to Their Voices” study, which is the loss of voice that females experience as they enter adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Rogers, 2001). Although this theory has been related primarily to Caucasian youth, Fine (2003) discussed the consequences of urban youth
who are silenced in their schools. Robinson and Ward (1991) also noted that many African American adolescents participate in self-destructive behaviors in reaction to stereotypes, life demands, and internalization of negative images of African-American women.

While feminism guided conceptualization, Relational-Cultural Theory guided the design of the program and the research methodology. Strong Links was based on the idea that girls need to form healthy relationships with girls in their peer group and with adult women. Being in relationship may help prevent disconnection. A group format supports this and may also encourage girls to strengthen their ability to relate to other girls and women (Hartling, 1996; Nakkula, 2006; Nicholson et al., 2004; Silliti, 2004).

The design of the activities within the group was based on theories of expressive therapies and art education. Expressive modalities such as visual art making, listening to or making music, and participating in drama have processes that can be beneficial for working with adolescents who have a difficult time with talking to express their feelings and thoughts (Brunick, 1999). A young woman who struggles with verbal expression may be internalizing her feelings, using physical means to express her feelings, acting destructively toward her self or others, and/or being verbally abusive to peers. Additionally, the process of art making can reduce stress when it is experiential and “involves physical action, kinesthetic qualities, and perceptual experiences” (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 19).

Strong Links was also based on the feminist ecological model that notes multiple levels of influence on an individual’s development. The feminist ecological model attends to individual relationships, organizations’ impacts on individuals, global and policy issues, as well as planetary and historical impacts. Instead of attributing individual difficulties to internal deficits, the feminist ecological model emphasizes that there are social, political, and institutional impacts
on a person’s development over time (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002). Feminist ideology is the thread that links the ecological model with Gilligan’s theory and the Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). Gilligan’s theory is more specifically related to the ecological model because it indicates that larger societal standards, norms, and gender stereotypes have an impact on the individual. The feminist ecological model is related to RCT in the shared notion of the importance of adult female mentoring relationships.

Research Questions

The intention of this study was to understand the unique needs, strengths, and experiences’ of urban adolescent Latina, Caucasian and African American females who participated in Strong Links, an expressive art-based program. The following questions were raised:

1. Do the girls identify the arts-based interventions as an important part of their experiences within Strong Links?

2. Has the use of arts contributed to the positive use of their voice?

3. Do the girls prefer one expressive strategy over others?

4. Do the girls report any negative experiences in Strong Links?

Guiding Concepts

Adolescence: For the purpose of this study, adolescence refers to girls from the ages of 12–15.

Urban: Urban refers to several urban districts of Boston. These districts include the location of the school where the study took place and areas where the young women live. In this study, urban also implies issues with poverty, violence, difficult housing, and drugs.
Voice: Voice is defined as an individual’s ability to express her thoughts, views, desires, and struggles (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). It is her ability to behave in a way that stays true to her inner, true self (A. Rogers, 2001; Sillitti, 2004).

Expressive techniques: Expressive therapy is defined as “the use of art, music, dance/movement, drama, poetry/creative writing, play, and sandtray within the context of psychotherapy, counseling, rehabilitation, or health care” (Malchiodi, 2005). For this program, expressive techniques, not therapies, were used. The distinction is that Strong Links was not a therapy group, but a program that used writing, music, drama, and art to help the girls to express themselves and build on their strengths.

Minority: In this study, minority refers to low-income Latina and African American girls, also referred to as “girls of color” in this document. (For this document, the use of “Hispanic” reflects its usage in cited studies or research; similarly the use of “Black” or “black.” When girls have referred to themselves as black or when American black communities are cited in comparison with American white communities, “black” is used. Otherwise, the more formal “African American” is used in the document.) Because differences within the Latina and African American ethnicities vary widely, the definitions of each are defined below.

Latina: Latina can refer to a number of different backgrounds; in this study it refers to children whose families are from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Cuba, and Brazil. The majority of the youth in the study were second-generation immigrants.

African American: African American can also refer to a number of different backgrounds. For this study, African American refers to children whose families are from Haiti. The majority of the youth in this study were second-generation immigrants.
Participant-action: The research method used, which refers to the researcher as simultaneously being a practitioner involved with the participants in an intervention being studied (Way, 2007).

Participant-observer: The researcher, while actively participating in an intervention, is also keenly observing the processes to accurately describe them in research findings (Way, 2007).

Voice-centered relational approach: The overall approach to research, which emphasizes the girls’ voices and allows the participants to speak for themselves. The purpose of the research is to learn from participants while engaging in a meaningful relationship with them (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

Chapter 2 will review relevant research related to the research problems, questions, and terms defined in Chapter 1.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This chapter begins by reviewing the literature and critically examining some of the mainstream perspectives on adolescent girls’ development. More specifically, urban minority girls and the socio-cultural influences on their development will be discussed. The importance of relationships and resiliency in girls’ development will also be briefly addressed in this chapter; however, for a more in-depth review of these two topics consult the companion studies of Christina Tortolani and Amanda Allen. Next, the positive youth development (PYD) movement will be explained in terms of understanding and working with adolescents. A general report of expressive therapies and interventions will be given, as well as a more in-depth description of the use of expressive strategies with adolescents and in schools. The curriculum created for this dissertation and the participatory action approach used will also be included in this discussion. Finally, adolescent programming practices, implementation and existing programs will be reviewed.

Adolescent Girls’ Development

Theories on adolescent development began with early psychologists—Freud, Erikson, and Object Relations theorists, for example. Although many of the early theorists and psychologists made great contributions to the field of psychology, their views on adolescent girls’ development were flawed. Freud’s, and many other subsequent theories, made girls the lesser sex because of their biological makeup. Later theorists, who emphasized separation and individuation, made women who desired connection seem developmentally flawed. Nancy Chodorow, however, criticized many of these ideas and argued that girls developed in a more relational context and remained more connected to their mothers than boys, who tended to
individuate sooner (Erikson, 1968; Sharf, 2008). It was not until the 1990s, however, that there was a surge in research and literature on adolescent girls’ development.

In the 1990s, often referred to as the decade of the girl, a number of feminist theorists, researchers, and psychologists devoted specific attention to adolescent girls’ development (Ward, 2007a). In the past, psychology had focused less time, energy, and research on this developmental period, making it difficult for psychologists to understand how girls actually progressed through adolescence. While adolescence was once defined by Freud and other early theorists in terms of biological processes, Pipher (1994) argues that puberty is the biological process and adolescence is the “social and personal experience[s] of that process” (p. 54).

Adolescence is a critical period of time for many girls who often face choices that will either help them to maintain who they really are or lead them to develop a false sense of self (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Pipher, 1994). The intent of this project was to help adolescent girls navigate this developmental period. The Strong Links curriculum, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, was based in part on the literature from feminist researchers of the 1990s.

Adolescent Girls Silenced

A shift in the literature on adolescent development began with Brown and Gilligan (1992), two of the first feminist theorists to thoroughly study adolescent girls’ development. In their research, they discovered that adolescence is a period of time in which girls’ voices are silenced. Instead of maintaining the strong sense of self that they had during elementary school, girls suddenly feel pressure to conform to the social standards of femininity. Rather than expressing oppositional views, they feel it more important to be courteous and nice. In fear of expressing feelings that may be too strong, volatile, sad, angry, sexual, or loud, adolescent girls often swallow those feelings as opposed to saying how they feel. By the time girls and boys
reach middle school they already have a sense that being a girl is equated with constraints, while being a boy is equated with opportunity (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Orenstein, 1994). One criticism of Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) work is that they focus the majority of their attention on Caucasian middle- and upper-middle class girls. Because the “Listening to Their Voices” study was located in an urban middle school with low-income girls of color, it was difficult to apply directly Brown and Gilligan’s theories. This evaluation sought to expand on their literature by studying the silencing of adolescent girls in an urban low-income population.

Additional research on the silencing of adolescent girls from a variety of backgrounds indicates that adolescent girls have a number of reactions once they realize that certain thoughts, feelings, and emotions are not socially acceptable. Although Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest that girls most often literally lose their ability to speak out, other researchers talk about a variety of behaviors including withdrawal, conformity, acting out, anger, and depression. Some research suggests that regardless of their reaction, girls may sacrifice some of their authenticity and suffer a major loss in self-esteem as they attempt to navigate adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Pipher, 1994; Way, 1995). Still, the majority of that literature focuses on Caucasian upper-and middle-class girls. When silence is a choice, it is a privilege; however, when youth feel pressured to remain silent because of power differentials, social standards, or gender stereotyping, it is a problem (Torre, 2005).

Youth need a safe space for expressing a variety of feelings and thoughts. This was one purpose of Strong Links. For middle school girls, a safe space would allow more of an opportunity to express a wide range of emotions with less fear of retribution. These girls may benefit from meeting with other girls and adult women mentors in a safe environment, and
potentially maintain their voice and self esteem. The literature on urban adolescent girls’ experience in school will be reviewed because it is important to understand the difficulties that youth experience in their educational settings.

Silencing of Adolescent Girls in School Settings

Research on the silencing of adolescents has expanded to cover how schools play a role in stifling adolescent voices. In particular, Torre (2005) notes that school, the place where adolescents spend the most day-time hours, most often silence marginalized individuals. While school once served as a safe place where youth could express views, young people report that this is no longer true (Dimitriadis, 2005). Fine (2003) indicated that urban schools are particularly interested in silencing youth who voice dissent. As a result, school officials often prevent students from mentioning topics in the school and the classroom that the students find meaningful. Rather than providing space to discuss discrimination, job opportunities after high school, urban violence, and other pressing issues, teachers report avoiding the topics because they feel that they are discouraging. They often praise the urban youth who sit silently in the class. But research indicates that urban youth who remain in high school have higher rates of depression and are less assertive than youth who dropped out (Fine, 2003). This research points to the need for programs that bolster youth’s strengths and provide them with the space to voice their questions, concerns, thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Research also indicates that boys are more likely to be vocal during classroom lessons and discussion. Researchers suggest that girls are intimidated by males, want to seem less intelligent, and are more fearful of having the incorrect answer than boys, so they silence their voices (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Pipher, 1994). Although this may be true, researchers have rarely directly asked the girls if this is their actual experience. The girls’ silence may also be a
reflection of their depression, anger, or aggression. Whatever the reason, this research demonstrates the need for all-female school-based programs which would provide a more comfortable space for young women to express themselves.

Few programs seek to include a social action/justice component to their curriculum. Strong Links sought to take curriculum development further by adding a social justice and social action component. Youth should feel that they have some ability to make change in their environment. They may also benefit from help with learning skills to advocate for their own needs and rights.

There is another aspect to consider. Kim and Markus (2005) criticized research that suggests that talking and verbal expression is always better, noting that American society often values autonomy over relationships. This definition of talking fails to account for girls and different cultural groups who are often more relationally focused, and who, as a result, often speak less in public. Kim and Markus’s (2005) research supports the premise of the Strong Links program, in the need to include the arts in education and girls programming. The purpose of art is to give youth the opportunity to express themselves in media other than autonomous verbal language.

**Multicultural Adolescent Girls’ Development**

_African American girls’ development._ While the literature from the 1990s offered much information on female adolescent development, the theories originated primarily from research with Caucasian middle-and upper-middle class girls. Researchers like Ward (2007b) represent a shift in the literature as she, and others, attend to the development of adolescent youth of color. This shift in the literature was important to the development of the curriculum for this research project because the participants are urban girls of color. Although there has been an increase in
literature on girls of color, Ward (2007a) argued that most of the current research continues to focus on upper-middle class Caucasian females. The research that does exist on lower income African American children tends to focus primarily on boys. She argued that although African American boys have low achievement, high homicide rates and other issues that warrant concern, African American girls are also struggling and need more attention. This study seeks to add to the literature on urban adolescent girls of color development and experiences in all girls programs.

Robinson and Ward’s (1991) research is an example of the more current research on African American girls. Although there are a number of different topics within the more current research on girls of color, only the research that is most relevant to this project is included. The majority of the previous literature on the development of girls of color focuses primarily on their problem behaviors from a deficit model perspective. Robinson and Ward (1991) focus on African American girl’s development and redefine African American girls’ unplanned pregnancies, school failure, substance abuse and risk taking as resistance for survival in response to their life situations. They argue that healthy development in black girls needs to shift from resistance for survival to resistance for liberation – meaning that they stay connected to others, connected to their history, and engage in more prosocial behaviors (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Robinson & Ward, 1991). Healthy development also means that African American girls should feel empowered to trust their voice and perspective so that they can resist negative stereotypes, oppression and racism (Ward, 2007b). Robinson and Ward make important contributions to the literature by reframing African American adolescent girls’ behaviors that have been traditionally misunderstood and/or stigmatized. Historically, African American girls’ communication style and academic performance have been misunderstood or misinterpreted in research. These are
areas that warrant additional research and deeper, more accurate understanding because they affect program development.

The impact of African American girls’ assertiveness on their academic performance is one example of an area in research that is not given enough attention. Research has indicated that assertiveness, which was encouraged in this program, is valued by low-income African American females. Assertiveness is also associated with higher self-esteem in low-income African American adolescents when compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Despite this finding, the girls’ assertiveness often has a negative impact on their academic success, which can lead to being pushed out or to dropping out of school on their own (O'Connor, et al., 2005). As previously noted, urban schools tend to value the students who are quiet and compliant, so African American girls who voice their opinions are not highly valued (Torre, 2005). There is also a cultural prescription that associates “acting white” with academic success, which is a problem for many low-income, black youth (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). It can be difficult to be accused of abandoning your racial identity; however, as one African American young woman wrote in her essay in response to being told that she spoke like a white girl, “No, I’m talking like an educated girl” (Unknown, 2008d).

Strong Links drew from Robinson and Ward’s (1991) theories. It used a strengths-based perspective and encouraged resistance for liberation through the use of expressive projects that encouraged self-expression in relationships. The intent was to help participants become assertive and handle conflicts in a way that benefited rather than hurt their chances of making their points successfully. Assertiveness in African American women is also often associated with attending higher education, so it seems that when low-income African American girls use their voice, independence, and assertiveness in a strategic way, they have a stronger chance of succeeding
academically (O'Connor, et al., 2005). The girls’ assertiveness was encouraged through activities that fostered teamwork, and group problem solving. This philosophy was based in part on research stating that African American mothers want their girls to learn the necessary skills to survive in a Caucasian society and that includes learning how to survive independently (Costigan, Cauce, & Etchison, 2007; O'Connor, et al., 2005).

**Latina girls development.** While research on the development of all girls of color is scarce, there is a definite paucity in information on Latina adolescent development. It is ironic that although Latinos are increasing in numbers in the United States, information on how they develop, achieve, cope, and grow is still lacking. Much of the literature that does exist on urban low-income Latina adolescents focus on deficits and risk factors, with particular attention placed on their sexuality development (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). It is of course important to be aware of the risk factors that exist for Latinas as they navigate adolescence, but being aware of and knowing how to promote strengths is equally as important. Strong Links occurred in a school that is dominated by Latinos. This evaluation sought to add to the current literature by including a strengths-based perspective on Latina adolescents’ development.

When compared with peers from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and to their male Latino peers, Latina adolescents seem to be doing developmentally worse. Research indicates that Latina adolescents are more depressed and have lower self-esteem than Latino males and peers from other ethnic backgrounds (O'Connor, et al., 2005; Orenstein, 1994). When interviewed, Latino families and their adolescent daughters report feeling anxious about the transition to adolescence because they associate it with negative consequences like teenage pregnancy, drug use, and dropping out of school. Families worry that their daughters will not be able to succeed in the United States and that this failure will begin during adolescence (Stewart,
2004). Given that Latino families and youth are so anxious about the start of adolescence, it is especially important to have a supportive program available to help Latina adolescents build on their strengths as they navigate this developmental period. This program sought to provide this support while also gathering more information on how to most effectively support Latina adolescents and their families.

While many research studies emphasize the risk factors for Latina adolescents, Stewart’s research (2004) moves beyond problem behaviors and seeks to identify how culture, ethnicity, and gender interact with identity development during adolescence. She contextualizes her study by examining the meaning behind the Quinceanera, or the sweet fifteen birthday celebration, that is commonly celebrated among Latinas as the transition from childhood to womanhood. Stewart argues that culture has an important impact on identity development and that the planning and experiencing of this ceremony and party can be a useful way for adolescent girls to begin to grapple and make meaning of dual identities. Stewart’s study adds to the literature by examining the importance of culture on identity development; however, it fails to discuss how programs in schools and other community organizations can help to nurture Latina adolescents’ identity development. Although the planning and experience of the Quinceanera can be a monumental experience for girls as they navigate adolescence, girls in middle school also need support with identity development. Middle school often represents the start of the adolescent identity development process so providing support to youth in school, a place where they spend a large amount of time, is likely to be helpful to them.

This evaluation study acknowledged that identity development for adolescent girls of color can be complicated by the recognition of the presence of dual identities. When girls grow up surrounded by others who share the same culture, developing an individual and cultural
identity is relatively smooth. However, when girls are located in a mainstream culture that is different from their familial culture, they are forced to try to reintegrate their own culture with the more mainstream culture (Stewart, 2004). This is an additional developmental challenge that youth from mainstream cultural backgrounds do not face. Because this research project was coordinated and implemented by three Caucasian women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and suburban areas, the researchers were mindful of their differences from the participants. As they worked with the participants on the activities that revolved around issues of development, the evaluators needed to integrate the girls’ culture of origin and be willing to learn from the participant’s experiences.

Being open to discussing differences was important for helping the girls to feel like they were in a safe space that could provide strong and supportive mentoring and peer relationships. The premise of this is based on research which states that Caucasian, African American, and Latina adolescent females develop in relationships with others. Rather than individuating from family, Latina females remain connected throughout adolescence and look to their families as a source of guidance and support as they carve out their personal identities. Conflict and difficulties tend to occur when the young woman’s view of her developing self is in conflict with the views of her family (Stewart, 2004). In creating a program that is based on relationships, mentorship, and identity development, it was important to work with the girls on managing their experiences around relationships with families, peers, and others in their lives.

This research has also influenced the methodology for this dissertation. Participatory action research, described in greater detail in Chapter 3, was used in this study because it allowed the researchers to also be facilitators. Keeping in mind that adolescent girls of color have a tendency to develop in relationship, the premise of this program and the subsequent research was
to develop a relationship with the girls that allowed them to feel more comfortable in responding to research questions (Torre, Fine, Alexander, & Genao, 2007).

*Socio-cultural Influences on Adolescent Girls’ Development*

There are a plethora of socio-cultural influences on adolescent girl’s development. For the purposes of this chapter, the influence of school, media, cultural values, and sexual scripts on the development of urban girls of color is explored.

*School.* The transition to middle school is a particularly challenging move for adolescent girls who often find that their relationships with adults are not as supportive and close as they were in elementary school (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Additionally, a large number of urban minority youth report either witnessing or experiencing some form of violence at their middle school. Experiencing and witnessing violence in school has been indicated in psychological adjustment difficulties, and yet most youth report that school is not a safe space to discuss their concerns about issues with violence (E. J. Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Torre, 2005). Research indicates that teachers rarely intervene when there is bullying, sexual harassment, intimidation, or taunting among peers, leading youth to feel uncomfortable in school (Nicholson, et al., 2004). This research points to the need for safe spaces in school, like Strong Links, for youth to connect with adults around issues of concern.

Urban middle schools are particularly challenging for young people as they are usually under-funded, under-resourced, and under the scrutiny of the No Child Left Behind Policy (Dimitriadis, 2005). The majority of Latino and African American students attend schools where more than half of the students are poor, the teachers are less qualified and have higher turnover, and where there are less demanding courses offered (Orfield & Lee, 2005). The high stakes testing movement has created even greater inequities in schools as education is no longer
student-centered but test-centered. Families from higher socioeconomic brackets have the luxury of purchasing a more student-centered and creative education for their children, while urban minority youth are most often not afforded that opportunity (Dimitriadis, 2005). Educational inequities have a major impact on urban minority youth’s chances of competing against children from suburban communities who can receive the best education (C. McCarthy, et al., 2005).

Boston’s school system is of particular interest due to the move toward more segregated schools for African American and Latino students (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

Due to the educational inequities in urban schools, the high stakes testing movements, and the paucity of creative education, it is of even greater importance to offer youth a creative outlet in their school environments. Strong Links occurred during the school day. It was meant to provide a creative outlet and a safe space for girls to process their experiences.

**Media.** Mass media has had a detrimental impact on suburban Americans’ understanding of urban minority youth. Society is inundated with negative images of urban minority youth as pregnant, daughters of single welfare mothers, unemployed, thieves, or as gang members. Rather than portraying the complexities of inner city life or the strengths of urban minority youth, media offers a simplistic and deficiency based point of view. This leads middle class America to want to avoid urban America (Checkoway, et al., 2005; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; C. McCarthy, et al., 2005; Robinson & Ward, 1991; Sanders & Bradley, 2005).

When interviewed, adolescent girls talk about the mixed messages that they receive from the media and how media messages negatively impact their development. Media has the effect of disempowering young women who come to believe in the images they see and hear (Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004). It is essential to help young women of color critically examine media so that they can combat the messages and preserve their sense of self (Ward, 2007a). Research on the
negative impact of media on girls’ development is abundant, but includes little on how to help the girls to fight against it. Programs that work with urban adolescent girls of color should help them navigate negative media influences, but also should consider helping girls to speak out against injustice. While Strong Links did not spend time specifically deconstructing media images with the participants, it utilized a social justice/action perspective and helped the girls learn how to advocate for what they needed and/or wanted.

*Cultural Influences*

*Latinas.* Cultural perspectives have a definite influence on adolescent development. Latina’s emphasis on the supportiveness of family and belongingness within the family system may have an impact on girls as they desire to participate in extracurricular activities, to form friendships outside of the family, and to pursue higher education. Some youth feel that they are bicultural and need to balance their cultural identity with some of the more mainstream Anglo values (Faulkner, 2003; Stewart, 2004). The researchers for this project were sensitive to the girls’ ability and desires and/or their lack of desire to separate from the family system.

The traditional Latino values of machismo and marianismo, referring to female subordination, submissiveness, and virginal purity, may also have an impact on girls’ development in a society dominated by Anglo values (Ascencio, 2002). When empowering young women to have a voice, to be assertive, and proactive; program leaders need to be aware of the environments that the participants will return to at the end of the day. Practitioners need to discuss the implications of assertiveness and the potential hazards associated with these skills. Girls needed to understand how to implement their skills safely and how to protect themselves from danger.
A significant amount of research attends to the intersection of culture and sex. Within the Latina culture there is a strong cultural standard that girls and women appear sexually attractive and provocative but that they remain pure, virginal, and have no sexual desires of their own (Ascencio, 2002; Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Lopez & Lechuga, 2007; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003; Pastor, et al., 2007b). At the same time, Latinos are often hailed as being sexually aggressive and this is seen as an important trait in males. This double standard for males and females can be troubling for young Latinas who are trying to understand their bodies, their sexuality, desires, and how they fit in society (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Posner, 2006).

While many Latinas acknowledge sexual desires, they admit that they are careful not to let others know of their sexual activities for fear of being labeled a slut (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Posner, 2006). Other Latinas are so fearful of labels that they refuse to acknowledge any sexuality within themselves, avoiding the potential stigmas of being called a slut, becoming pregnant, or of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Posner, 2006). For the girls who are sexually active, access to birth control and condoms is limited by the machismo and Catholic or other religious prescriptions against usage. This is likely to have contributed to higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases among Hispanic teenagers (Augustine, et al., 2004). More research needs to be conducted in this area, as most often researchers portray urban girls of color as hypersexual beings, when this is a far too simplistic portrayal of reality (Tolman, 2002). The Strong Links program did not specifically focus on sexuality, but several weeks were devoted to working on self identity (for more information on the curriculum, please see the Appendix B and Chapter 3). A part of one’s identity includes understanding one’s sexuality, and this was addressed in discussion and during the creation of the art projects.
Interviews with Latinas also revealed that they struggle with conflicting cultural messages from home. Latina mothers commonly encourage their daughters to be “mujer de hogar” (woman of the home), “valerse por si misma” (self-reliant), and “buenas hijas and esposas” (good daughters and good wives). At the same time, the girls are expected to do well in school but to balance that with taking care of cleaning and caring for younger siblings. Ultimately, girls are expected to marry and to become a mother (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). This can be a very difficult balance for young women who struggle to meet all of these demands from home and school (Taylor, Veloria, & Verba, 2007). Such cultural prescriptions may be in conflict with the program, so it was especially important to be open about each individual’s cultural identity. The researchers needed to be sensitive to the girls’ culture and integrate the participants’ cultural identities into the curriculum.

African Americans. Cultural expectations around sex and sexuality for African American adolescent girls are somewhat different than Latina cultural prescriptions. African American girls report that they feel more pressure to have a boyfriend, to have sex with him to keep him around, and to use sex as a way to keep up with their friends. Unlike Latinas, African American girls do not feel the social stigma around engaging in sex or shame about becoming pregnant. However, African American girls rarely discuss pleasure, curiosity, and arousal when discussing sex (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). It was important to be aware of the differences among the participants’ understanding and perceptions of sexuality and sex as the researchers facilitated the program. When conversation is facilitated well, participants may learn from and help one another navigate complicated cultural and media messages around sexuality, sex, and other cultural issues that arise.
African American racial and cultural socialization focuses on within-group strengths. An important component of many African American families’ lives are spirituality and religion, which is often cited as a source of strength and support within a racist, classist, and sexist society. Girls are also provided with proactive messages from family about racial discrimination and are taught how to combat these forces. Girls are often socialized to be strong and persistent, to express anger and to be intelligent – characteristics that are often associated with masculinity in the United States (Sanders, 2005). Again, because within-group strengths are emphasized for adolescent African American females, it was important to talk about how the researchers’ skin color and backgrounds might potentially impact the group dynamics. The researchers in this program tried to bolster the girls preexisting strengths by encouraging them to maintain their persistence. A program implemented effectively should help adolescent African American females, who often are just beginning to recognize social inequities, to maintain their voices (Sanders & Bradley, 2005).

*Relationships and Resiliency in Adolescent Girl’s Development*

A broad overview of the importance of relationships and resiliency is addressed; however, for a more complete review of this literature, see the companion studies of Christina Tortolani and Amanda Allen.

In contrast to earlier theories, research from the 1990s and beyond suggest that healthy girls’ development occurs while in growth-fostering relationships; disconnection is considered a source of psychological distress (Hartling, 1996; Sillitti, 2004). One potential problem for girls is that their desire for close relationships may contribute to their being willing to sacrifice some of their authenticity in an attempt to preserve relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Although much of the research from Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, and other leaders in the field focuses on
Caucasians, other theorists note that African American and Latinas also develop while in growth-fostering relationships (Robinson & Ward, 1991; Ward, 2007a; Way, 1995).

While many urban girls of color are able to engage in authentic and comfortable relationships with female peers, many report that they are unable to find their voice among male peers (Way, 1995). This finding speaks to the importance of Strong Links because it was an all-female space for girls to connect with other female peers and adults. Connection with supportive adults in a safe space reduces problem behaviors and leads to better self-esteem (Fedele, 2004; Hoskins & Mathieson, 2004).

Connection with peers and adult women is considered a protective factor for many urban minority girls; however, understanding other protective factors is essential for developing more beneficial programming. Additional protective factors include: positive attributes of individuals and experiences, events and relationships that: interrupt harmful developmental paths, diminish the impact of stressful situations, change dysfunctional systems, increase self-efficacy, and provide opportunities for positive education, vocational, and personal growth (Leadbeater & Way, 2007; Shaffer, Coffino, Boelcke-Stennes, & Masten, 2007). This strengths-based program sought to offer a space where these protective factors could be nurtured.

Resiliency refers to a process thriving, or of developing competencies, and a presence of protective factors despite exposure to significant threats and challenges to successful development (Shaffer, et al., 2007). More research is needed to learn how to promote resiliency among urban minority females. Rather than focusing on young people’s deficits, this research project noted youth’s strengths. This research will add to the literature by seeking to understand how to build-on strengths to promote resiliency.

*Positive Youth Development (PYD)*
In 1993, Kazdin noted that practitioners should “build strengths, resilience, and coping skills as a way of enhancing functioning” (p. 128). The positive youth development perspective expanded on this concept and is defined as:

[stressing] the plasticity of human development and regards this potential for systematic change as a ubiquitous strength of people during their adolescence. The potential for plasticity may be actualized to promote positive youth development among urban youth when young people are embedded in an ecology that possesses and makes available to them resources and supports that offer opportunities for sustained, positive adult–youth relations, skill-building experiences, and opportunities for participation in and leadership of valued community activities. Such supports exist even in those urban settings that many policy makers have abandoned as resources depleted or resources absent (Lerner et al., 2007, p. 4).

The five C’s (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) are the essential components of positive youth development (Lerner, et al., 2005; Lerner, et al., 2007). One study reported that the five C’s had empirical evidence supporting the positive youth development model; however, that study, it should be noted, consisted of early adolescents, who are younger than the youth participating in Strong Links. Focusing on positive youth development versus deficits in youth has been associated with positive youth behavior outcomes, increased academic achievement, increased self-control, and better peer skills and problem solving skills (Bell, 2003; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkings, 2004; Lerner, et al., 2005; Lerner, et al., 2007; Scales & Leffert, 2004)

Leadbeater and Way (1996) were two of the first to focus on urban girls’ strengths, how these girls challenged stereotypes and developed a strong sense of self. They focused on the positive change they were capable of within social, educational, and political realms instead of on what they could not do. Although time usually yields much progress, there continues to be a dearth of knowledge about minority girls’ identity development in urban settings, particularly as related to strength-based development (Lerner, et al., 2007; Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004).
“Listening to Their Voices” seeks to add to the literature by including a strength-based perspective on urban adolescent girls’ development through interaction with them in a girls program. It is important to note that when urban girls are defined in terms of their strengths versus their deficits they are quite successful. The positive youth perspective allows for girls’ personal resources to come to the forefront (Lerner, et al., 2007).

Scales and Leffert (2004) are also key players in the positive youth development movement. Their focus is on specific developmental assets that contribute to positive youth development and the importance of youth’s social context as they grow and develop. They describe external (support, empowerment, boundaries, expectations, and constructive use of time) and internal (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity) assets and how these contribute to positive youth development. Ultimately their research notes that youth have a greater chance of positive development, despite the presence of risk factors, when they have greater numbers of assets.

For example, Scales and Leffert (2004) note that having three non-family member adult relationships is associated with higher grades, more prosocial behavior, less substance use, fewer feelings of loneliness, higher self-esteem, greater hopes for future, and increased mood. Additionally, youth who are empowered by feeling valued by their community and others report such outcomes as having a higher self-esteem and reduced problem behaviors (Scales & Leffert, 2004). This program intended on providing each of these assets for the participating members.

Research indicates that programs that focus specifically on problem behaviors are the least effective, especially when the social contexts of young people’s lives are ignored. Programs that are successful promote both the external and internal assets within the youth’s social context because there is a strong link between the presence of developmental assets and positive youth
behavior. Positive youth development applied to programs means that adults recognize the need to work with youth to develop appropriate programs that meet their needs. Effective programs also facilitate interactions between peers because the greatest amount of learning occurs with them. Girls are especially affected by gaining strong interpersonal relationships and cite friendship as an important protective factor (Cohen, 2005; Lerner, et al., 2007; Loder & Hirsch, 2003; Molnar, Roberts, Browne, Gardener, & Biker, 2005; Nicholson, et al., 2004; Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004; Scales & Leffert, 2004). The design of Strong Links was based on feedback from a group of girls at the school where the study took place. It was grounded in relational contexts that were meant to encourage bonds between the participants.

Leadbeater and Way (2007) argued the importance of safe places where adult women can support girls’ positive development. Mentors need to be flexible with youth and accept and value them for who they are (Scales & Leffert, 2004). And while many programs intend to approach their work this way, some are unable to allow the girls’ free expression. For instance, in one program, a group of Caucasian female mentors had a difficult time allowing urban girls to openly discuss issues, concerns, and opinions on sexuality (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006). Flexibility was a particularly important consideration for this program as all three of the practitioner/researchers were Caucasian females working with diverse urban youth. It was important to be cognizant of personal biases and to be mindful of being open to any conversation that the participants brought forth.

Leadbeater and Way (2007) make an important contribution to the literature in their discussion of urban adolescent youth development; however, this project intended on taking their research one step further. Their research is based on interviews with youth; whereas this project was based on an actual program for girls. This project aimed to add to the existing literature by
exploring their experiences, views, concerns, coping mechanisms and hopes for the future. The importance of this project is highlighted by the statistic that only 22% of racially and ethnically diverse youth report that they have adult support. With research indicating that youth who have positive adult supports are more resilient throughout adolescence, it is essential that more adults be made available to youth (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

*The Intersection of Positive Youth Development and the Feminist Ecological Perspective*

The feminist ecological model and positive youth development model framed the creation of this program. Positive youth development is most successful when youth’s multiple contexts are considered and included in the program (Leadbeater & Way, 2007; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Ballou (2002) expands on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory. She introduces three layers. Layer 1 refers to the individual’s immediate relationships with family, friends, neighbors, mentors, and others. The importance of learning by being in relationship with others was used to create Strong Links, a program able to adapt to youth’s needs to connect (Leadbeater & Way, 2007; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Layer 2 refers to formal organizations and social policy as in legal, governmental, religious, and academic institutions. This study took place in an academic institution bound by its own politics and constraints. Incorporating the school community into this program was essential to its success. Finally, layer 3 represents a more global view of understanding of issues such as the distribution of resources, capitalism in the West, technological advances, and human rights issues. The young people in this program were from marginalized communities and in a poorly funded school. Addressing these issues with the girls was an essential component of the project.

The feminist ecological model also advocates for understanding the planetary and historical forces and how they impact individuals. This is especially important to consider with
“Listening to their Voices”

this program, as many of the youth are from families who recently immigrated to the United States and who contend with discrimination, racism, language barriers, acculturation, and with the historical implications of their homes of origin. The colonization of Puerto Rico is just one example of a historical force that has implications for many of the families and youth in the program. Additionally, this ecological model stresses the importance of the coordinates of gender, race, class and other social factors that impact an individual’s development. Again, racial, class and other social differences needed to be addressed due to the differences among the participants and the facilitators/researchers. The one component that the facilitators/researchers shared with the participants was gender. This was a noteworthy similarity as the program stressed the importance of girls connecting with other girls and of women connecting with girls. The implications of gender in society were explored in group through discussion and expressive activities.

*The Arts*

Strong Links was based on expressive therapies concepts. Because Strong Links was not a therapeutic group designed to ameliorate a specific pathology, expressive strategies and interventions, rather than expressive therapies, were used.

The literature on the use of the arts with adolescents comes from disparate places for the purposes of contextualizing Strong Links. Information from expressive therapy literature helps explain the purpose and benefits of using nonverbal methods with individuals. Arts education literature provides for a broader conceptualization and is useful for helping the reader to understand the importance of using the arts in school settings with adolescents. A review of the use of arts as a means to social justice is also explored because the model of the program is based on some feminist principles. Finally, a review of literature that pertains to the use of arts as a
means to facilitate wellness and holistic work with individuals is included. This section seeks to integrate literature from diverse fields that relate to the purpose and benefits of using arts to help individuals to heal, grow, learn, and change. All of these fields influenced the design of the program in this study.

One hole in the literature appears to be in the intersection of using the arts and feminist ecological thinking to encourage positive youth development. This addition is a major contribution of this evaluation.

*History and development of expressive therapies. The healing power of artistic expression is not a new concept. In ancient Egypt and Greece, people with mental illness were supposedly encouraged to participate in the art making process. While ancient civilizations may have intuitively known about the benefits of providing creative outlets for people suffering from psychological and physical distress, mental health providers did not start using such humanistic approaches to treatment like these until the 19th century. In fact, it was not really until post World War I that mental health practitioners discovered that art might have therapeutic benefits after discovering that usually unresponsive children would react to music (Malchiodi, 2005).

The development of creative therapeutic techniques became more popular during the 1920s when Margaret Lowenfeld developed a form of therapy known today as sandplay or sandtray therapy that is especially helpful for working with children. In 1923, Joseph Moreno founded psychodrama; a therapeutic technique in which people are encouraged to use drama to enact parts of their selves. By the 1930s and 1940s, art therapies began to become more popular as therapists were truly beginning to understand the therapeutic impact of expressive techniques for individuals who did not respond to more traditional talk therapy and psychoanalytic techniques (Ballou, 1995; Malchiodi, 2005).
Current use of expressive therapies can be conceptualized as an integrated approach to using the arts in therapy or as the use of one specific art medium, like music or drama, in each therapeutic session. Expressive therapy is an active healing process that engages the individuals’ senses; emphasizes self-expression, imagination and a mind-body connection (Malchiodi, 2005; McNiff, 2004). The creative process, not the beauty of the final product, is the focus of the session (Ballou, 1995). Because expressive therapies are primarily nonverbal, these approaches often help individuals express painful feelings or memories that are too difficult to be spoken; therefore, making them especially helpful with trauma victims, children, elderly populations, people suffering from illness, and women in childbirth (Ballou, 1995; Malchiodi, 2005; Mckelvey, 2003). Although expressive therapy will not be used in this program, the basis of using arts with adolescents originates from the expressive therapies theories.

*The benefits of using the arts as intervention.* The use of the arts (music, writing, poetry, visual arts, and drama) as an intervention has a number of benefits. Using art as an intervention can help teens navigate the many issues that they face during this period in a more comfortable format than discussion groups. Art making is a primarily non-verbal process, in that, generally, its making is a solo process and often does not require speaking out or engaging in oral discussion, performance, or commentary. This can be an effective strategy to use with teens because they are often not comfortable verbally communicating with adults about their personal concerns. It is an especially appropriate tool to use for teens that have developmental delays or learning difficulties because it (visual art, dance, and music, particularly) does not rely on verbal processing skills (Kahn, 1999; K. F. McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004; Schoenberg, Winter 2001).
On the other hand, art making can also be extremely useful for teens who are overly reliant on rational, scientific thought processing and need assistance with accessing and dealing with their emotions (Mckelvey, 2003; N. Rogers, 2004). Art making has the potential to calm, to heal, and to help one “gain symbolic control over terrifying circumstances and to establish an inner sense of security” (Malchiodi, 1998, p 138; Malchiodi, 2005). Both the act of creating and the final product have the potential to be therapeutic and healing (Flint, 2004; McNiff, 2004).

Music is another successful medium to use as an intervention with adolescents. Virtually every person has experienced the benefits of music in some way or another. Perhaps it was the calming benefits of the music in the car, or a particular song that brings back powerful memories. Listening to music has the potential to elicit emotions in people that they need to express and can be used for psycho-educational, medicinal, healing, recreational, and therapeutic purposes (Forinash, 2005; N. Rogers, 1993). The healing benefits of music cut across age, class, and gender and using music as an intervention can be effective with any number of people including adolescents. This program opened each week with listening to music that the participants selected. This served several purposes: to provide continuity at the start of each group, to connect the participants through listening to music, to help the girls to talk about issues that may be related to the music playing, and to allow the girls time to unwind after a long day of school.

Reading and writing poetry, stories, and essays can also be a helpful intervention for individuals. Often reading and writing is an easier and less threatening way for young people to communicate their difficulties (Flint, 2004). Although one study addressing the benefits of reading poetry was done with an elderly population, the premise of the study is that individuals can more easily communicate existential issues by reading poetry (Eriksson, 2004). Additionally,
writing is a form of communication about one’s story and allows individuals the opportunity to rewrite, reshape, and reinvent their stories, which can free people from sadness (Freely, 2004).

Although there is plenty of research and writing on the benefits and effects of using the arts as intervention, McCarthy (2004) argued that there is not enough empirical evidence to back up many of these claims. He notes that many factors, like the amount of time engaged in the art, the quality of the art activity, and the individual’s level of interest and involvement all have an impact on the benefits that the person will gain from his/her experience. His research contends that most of the long-term benefits from engaging in art occur when there is sustained involvement in the arts. This study sought to add to the literature on the use of the arts as an intervention by studying and documenting the girls’ participation in the art form, their level of interest in the activities, and how much they feel they have benefited from participation. The quality of the art is of less importance to this researcher than the impact that the experience may have on the participants.

Expressive intervention/strategies with adolescents in schools. The American school system is currently being dominated by national mandates and the No Child Left Behind Act. With little funding and an increase in high stakes testing for mathematics and English, public education is often forced to cut programs in the arts. Research indicates that schools that cut the arts have decreased morale, attendance and test scores (Hurley, June 25, 2004; K. F. McCarthy, et al., 2004). The decreased availability of the arts to students during in school time is a terrible loss to public education students. This is an even greater loss for urban youth whose parents often do not have enough funding to send them to after school programs that incorporate the arts.

When the arts cannot be utilized in classrooms, and even when they can, using the creative arts as interventions for youth in school is beneficial, as this is where they spend most of
their day-time hours. The use of art in school helps youth with developmental, learning, and social-emotional needs. Gardner's multiple intelligences suggest that there is more to intelligence than analytical ability and stresses that there are a number of equally important intelligences, some of which refer to the arts (Jackson, 2003; K. F. McCarthy, et al., 2004). Art can be cathartic for youth who often have little outlet to deal with their difficulties. Using arts with adolescents may also serve as a way to boost their self-esteem and has been an effective way to help young people to develop more positive relationships with peers (Mckelvey, 2003). This program used expressive activities as a way to bolster self-esteem and build relationships with peers. For more information on the expressive activities, see the curriculum in Appendix B.

Additionally, using arts with adolescents is important because they are still at the age where there is some openness to the creative process. As children grow and age, their openness to engaging in the creative process often decreases as a result of criticism of their art work or a desire to fit in with peers, for example. Self-reflective journal writing is also beneficial for this age group. Writing provides youth with an opportunity to write in their own voice and connect with their unique sense of self. Self-reflective journal writing was incorporated into each week’s sessions because the importance of reflection and adult responses to entries was recognized by the researchers.

Using the arts with adolescents can be a useful way to help them to externalize their feelings, promote internal growth and healing (Bryce, 1995; Moscartolo, 2006). Adolescents who are depressed may have a particularly difficult time expressing their feelings verbally, but are able to use violent or dark images and/or music as a way to externalize their pain (Malchiodi, 2003; K. F. McCarthy, et al., 2004; Pipher, 1994) Additionally, the art can often act as a tangible
reminder of what was done and that can be referred to and talked about at a later time (Malchiodi, 2003, 2005).

Applying the arts to work with adolescent girls. Gilligan and other researchers noted that adolescent girls often have a difficult time maintaining their voice in adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Art is often a useful way to help adolescents regain a sense of themselves and their voice. Using the arts in a group setting can be particularly important for adolescent females as themes of identity and belonging are very pertinent to this age group. Relying on the arts as a form of communication can help girls to connect to their inner voice and to open up in ways that verbal conversation alone would not allow. Talking about certain issues may be uncomfortable or anxiety provoking for some girls, so a range of creative activities can allow for a less threatening form of expression. Girls can be encouraged to be strong and to take risks when they are engaged in the art process and in trusting relationships with others (Schoenberg, Winter 2001). The premise of Strong Links was to create a safe environment for the participants and to provide them with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings through the arts and verbal expression.

Adolescent Programming

Out-of-school time programs are an important component in the lives of youth. Students who participate in out-of-school time programs have been shown to have higher school achievement and stronger relationships with adults. Research indicates that youth who engage in creative activities during out-of-school time programs have a stronger sense of self and greater self-esteem (Trammel, 2003). Due to the decreased funding in the arts in public schools, there is an even greater need for using the arts in out-of-school time programs. Contributing factors for positive outcomes of out-of-school time activities include but are not limited to having: caring
relationships between adults and participants; a strength-based approach to work; and a high staff-to-student ratio (Trammel, 2003). This project sought to provide space for creative outlets for youth during a Period of Discovery (the final period of the day that was devoted to mental health and social-emotional time) while also attempting to understand girls’ experiences in the program.

While general out-of-school time programs are important, a major need exists for all-girls programming. Way (1995) indicates that urban girls often have a difficult time expressing their views in co-educational groups. For that reason, and several others, Wheeler et al. (2005) argue that out-of-school time programs need to be gender sensitive and that additional research needs to be conducted on the efficacy of all-girls programming. Research is currently lacking on understanding girls’ development, what makes girls strong, their assets, and their experiences in programs. According to Wheeler et al. (2005), “Girls are best served in gender-sensitive programs – programs that pay explicit attention to gender, as well as to race, culture, and other aspects of girls’ lives such as socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and immigrant status” (p. 7). Unfortunately, most of the funding in Boston for out-of-school time programs is going to co-education programs, making Strong Links, an all girls program, an important addition to the existing programming.

Effective girls’ programming begins with a needs assessment of the girls, their families and the community. The actual environment needs to be a physically and emotionally safe space that is enjoyable for the youth. Not only does the design of the program need to be created with the input of the girls, but the decisions throughout the program need to be shared with the participants. While sharing responsibilities with the girls is important, virtually all girls also benefit from a mentoring relationship with a caring and validating adult. It is important to note
that there are documented challenges associated with mentoring across race and ethnicity, which was a potential barrier in this project. Because girls are in safe and supportive environments with a mentoring adult, it is important to help them critique cultural, familial, and societal messages. Their presence in a supportive environment allows this thoughtful critique to occur. Finally, collaboration with the community and adequate gender and racial sensitivity by the adult leaders is essential for all-girls programs to be successful (Wheeler, et al., 2005). This project began with needs assessment conducted through informal discussions with the RALLY program, youth, and staff at the school. The design of this program was based on informal information gathered from a group of girls in a pilot project. The researchers continued to incorporate the participants’ feedback into the construction of the activities each week.

**Review of girls programming.** Below is a table that summarizes some of the girls youth programming in the United States. Many of the programs listed and described include some components of Strong Links. Girlz II Women uses a PAR approach to researching/creating their program, uses an ecological approach, and targets urban adolescent females; DecisionArts and the Boston Children’s Hospital Expressive Therapy group uses the arts in their program that targets adolescent, urban females; Teen Voices also targets adolescent girls and uses the arts for activism, but there is no face-to-face connection with mentors; Full of Ourselves is an all-girls primary prevention program designed to bolster girls’ sense of self; and Owning Up tackles relational aggression and violence with adolescent girls. While all of the programs below make important contributions to youth programming, Strong Links combined a number of aspects to create a more holistic program.

Strong Links used the arts to work with urban minority adolescent females who may or may not have been identified as “at-risk” or as having a diagnosis. It incorporated social
justice/activism with expressive activities. These modalities were used to tackle a number of social issues that were important to girls this age, including relationships, culture, and stress. Strong Links was based on a needs assessment, girls’ feedback from a pilot program, and continued feedback throughout the program’s duration. Additional information on Strong Links and research methodology can be found in Chapter 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Title</th>
<th>Population and Demographics</th>
<th>Type of program</th>
<th>Foci</th>
<th>Contact information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girlz II Women</td>
<td>Urban middle school girls who are interested in participating. This is not a group that is specifically for girls with an identifiable diagnosis.</td>
<td>This is a prevention program for any girls who are interested in connecting with their peers. Uses a participatory action research design to make changes to program design.</td>
<td>Helping girls to strengthen voice and self-esteem through the use of a variety of activities including family nights, ropes courses, field trips, and lessons on the media.</td>
<td>Adina Davidson at 617-628-8815. (Unknown, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Voices</td>
<td>Girls from all over the country who are between the ages of 13 and 19. This is for any girl who wants to express herself.</td>
<td>This is a social activism program that is designed to allow girls a forum for expressing their opinions in a public space.</td>
<td>This is an online magazine that publishes written work from girls who want to speak up and out about issues that many girls face. They focus on social issues that impact girls including, but not limited to, media, sexual assault, and depression.</td>
<td>Teen Voices Online P.O. Box 120027 Boston, MA 02112-0027 (Unknown, 2007b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of Ourselves</td>
<td>Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls first participate in the program and then serve as mentors for fourth and fifth grade girls.</td>
<td>This is a primary prevention and educational program that works with girls on maintaining a healthy body image. Girls do not need to have disordered eating to participate.</td>
<td>This program explores a number of topics including healthy eating, positive qualities in the self, relaxation techniques, mindfulness as related to the body, and healthy body image.</td>
<td>Full of Ourselves McLean Hospital 115 Mill Street Belmont, MA 02478 (Steiner-Adair &amp; Sjostrom, 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Owning Up** | This curriculum serves middle and high school level boys and girls. | This is a 15-class curriculum that is designed to be taught in school by the school’s educators. | The focus of this curriculum is to address violence, bullying, relational aggression, and power differentials. | Rosalind Wiseman  
P.O. Box 11263  
Washington, DC 20008-9998  
(Wiseman, 2008) |
| **Girls Expressive Therapy Group – Children’s Hospital Boston** | This group serves girls ages 7-10 from all backgrounds. | This is an outpatient psychiatric group. | “Art, dance, movement, play and theater are used to help girls develop their abilities to express emotions in healthy ways and to improve self-esteem.” (Botta, 2007) | Department of Psychiatry;  
Children’s Hospital Boston  
Fegan 8;  
300 Longwood Avenue  
Boston, MA 02115 |
| **Decision Arts – Whittier Street Health Center** | This is a group designed for urban, at-risk females between the ages of 12 and 18. | This is a prevention program. | This program uses the arts to address social issues like sexually transmitted disease, violence, self-esteem issues, and birth control. They focus on healthy decision making. | Arts Therapy Department  
Whittier Street Health Center  
1125 Tremont Street  
Roxbury, MA 02120  
Tel: (617) 427-1000  
Fax: (617) 989-3247 |
| **Relational Practice Groups** | This is a time-limited group that can be conducted in a wide variety of settings such as educational and business organizations, mental health facilities, non-profit institutions, and any other organizations where there is interest in increasing relational effectiveness and connection. | This is an experiential/educational program. | This program includes didactic material on the core concepts of the Stone Center relational model, exercises for participants to deepen their understanding of relational practice, and readings relevant to the session topic. | Wellesley Center for Women  
Wellesley College  
106 Central Street  
Wellesley, MA 02481-8203  
USA  
781-283-2500  
WCW@wellesley.edu |
| **GirlsQuest** | This is a program designed for teenage girls (12+). | This is a mentoring program providing teenage girls with year-round | The program is a year-long commitment between the mentor and mentee. Each month, mentors and | Girls Quest  
150 West 30th Street, Suite 901  
New York, NY 10001 |
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<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td><strong>Girls Today Women Tomorrow</strong></td>
<td>This is a program designed for girls between the ages of 12–21. This is a leadership mentoring program that provides an environment where girls are mentored to create their own opportunities toward life success while contributing to their community as young leaders.</td>
<td>Telephone: 212-532-7050 Fax: 212-532-7061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Journey Toward Womanhood</strong></td>
<td>This program is designed for girls of African descent ages 12-17. This is a 13-week intensive and comprehensive program developed by “Sisterhood Agenda.” Rooted in the African “rites of passage” tradition of young women gathering in groups to receive guidance from older women, <em>A Journey Toward Womanhood</em> is a program with a modern approach to instilling knowledge of cultural roots and community awareness.</td>
<td>Sisterhood Agenda 524 Ridge Street Newark, NJ 07104 (973) 230-2765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Best Friends</strong></td>
<td>This program is designed for sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade girls who are at risk for unwanted pregnancies and HIV infection. This is a program operated through the Newark school system and were organized by Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes the health and well-being of youth. This program offers a range of classroom sessions, weekly mentoring meetings, structured activities designed to foster self-esteem, supportive relationships, and positive peer pressure as well as information about sexuality, substance</td>
<td>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s (RWJF) P.O. Box 2316 Princeton, NJ 08543 (877) 843-RWJF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>GoGirlGo! Boston</td>
<td>This is a program for girls in Boston.</td>
<td>GoGirlGo!                                identifies and weaves together quality resources within each community and has developed a curriculum providing tools to get girls active</td>
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<td></td>
<td>This is a program developed by the Women’s Sports Foundation to improve the health of sedentary girls and to keep girls involved in physical activity.</td>
<td>GoGirlGo! Boston Simmons College Athletic Department 300 The Fenway Boston MA 02115 617.521.1039 fax 617.521.1091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAVE (Project Anti-Violence Education) of the Urban Girl Scouts Program</td>
<td>This is a program designed for girls who live in underserved areas of St. Louis.</td>
<td>This is an innovative program developed to address the problem of youth violence. It helps girls grow strong by empowering them to prevent violence in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is a program developed by the Urban Girls Scouts of America.</td>
<td>Girl Scouts Council of Greater St. Louis 2130 Kratky Road St. Louis, MO 63114 <a href="http://www.gscgsl.org">www.gscgsl.org</a> 314.890.9569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl Talk</td>
<td>This program is designed for middle school girls.</td>
<td>Girl Talk                                3060 Peachtree Road NW Suite 2000 Atlanta, Georgia 30305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girl Talk is a student-to-student mentoring program that pairs middle school girls with high school girls who serve as mentors.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>This program aims to build self-esteem, learn the importance of community service and most importantly, benefit from a valuable relationship with a high school Girl Talk mentor. In turn, the high school leaders gain a sense of accomplishment knowing they’ve helped make a difference in the lives of many young girls.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls Inc. Media Literacy</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls of any age.</td>
<td>Girls Incorporated 120 Wall Street New York, NY 10005-3902 tel: 1-212-509-2000 fax: 1-212-509-8708 email:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Goals</td>
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<td>Girls Circle</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls from ages 9-18. It integrates relational theory, resiliency practices, and skills training in a specific format designed to increase positive connection, personal and collective strengths, and competence in girls. It is a strengths-based, skill building approach that creates a safe space for girls to address risky behaviors, build on protective factors, and improve relationships in a format that interests and engages girls.</td>
<td>It aims to counteract social and interpersonal forces that impede girls’ growth and development by promoting an emotionally safe setting and structure within which girls can develop caring relationships and use authentic voices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Safe Futures Program to Reduce Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Violence: The At-Risk and Delinquent Girls Component</td>
<td>This program is designed to meet the needs of at-risk and delinquent urban girls. This program is a multidisciplinary, comprehensive, and developmentally appropriate service to meet the unique emotional and developmental needs of young women.</td>
<td>Prevent and control of juvenile violence and delinquency through 1) reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors for delinquency. 2) providing a continuum of services for youth at risk of delinquency, as well as for juvenile offenders. 3) developing a full</td>
</tr>
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range of graduated sanctions designed to hold delinquent youth accountable to victims and the community, ensure community safety, and provide appropriate treatment and rehabilitation services.

Program Evaluation

As noted in the above chart, there are a number of girls programs available. It is important, however, that a program’s efficacy is evaluated. Too often programs are implemented, funded and supported only to discover that they were not effective. The DARE program is a quintessential example of a widely supported and highly funded program for youth that was found to be ineffective. The purpose of a program evaluation is to gather information that can be directly applied to the population/group being evaluated. They are meant to help program directors/creators understand the impact of their program. Evaluations are not designed to generalize to other populations, rather they are meant to provide answers to people directly involved in the program being evaluated (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004).

There are a variety of approaches to program evaluation. These approaches are objectives, management, consumer, expertise, adversary, naturalistic, or participant oriented (Dymond, 2001). Despite the variety of approaches to program evaluation, there are a smaller number of categories for program evaluation (Alkin & Christie, 2004). The categories of program evaluation are methods, valuing, and use. Evaluators who focus on methods maintain a strong belief in objectivity and design. The evaluators, who focus on valuing, stress the importance of the data. They are focused on social issues found within the program evaluation
(Lincoln & Guba, 2004). Evaluators who focus on use are primarily interested in who and how the information from the evaluation will be used (Alkin & Christie, 2004). Program evaluation that includes the participants in the process and that ultimately aims for social change is termed participatory evaluation (King, 1995). Participatory program evaluation, the approach used in this study, is reviewed below.

**Participatory Program Evaluation**

Participatory program evaluation represents a contrast to the standard positivist approach to evaluation. Rather than focusing on objective measures and nominative truth, participatory program evaluators work to empower participants who may have been disempowered through other types of evaluations and research (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2004). There are two identified categories of participatory evaluation: practical and transformative. Practical program evaluation stresses utility of the findings, whereas transformative program evaluation focuses on empowering participants (Sabo, 2003). This evaluation used a combination of these two approaches.

The participatory evaluation approach generally relies on inductive reasoning and multiple data sources. This approach is useful for determining how to improve a program (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Fitzpatrick, et al., 2004). A participatory evaluation for programs in schools can be a particularly beneficial approach. Staff and participants in schools are often disempowered by rules, regulations, and government mandates. Rather than using a traditional positivist approach to evaluation, participatory evaluation can help to provide school members with a voice. King (1995) noted the importance of working with members of the community that you are evaluating as a way to garner trust. For this evaluation, an emphasis was placed on
communicating and developing rapport with the teachers and RALLY staff members at the evaluation site.

Although gaining rapport with staff was important, youth were the focus of this evaluation. Participatory evaluation involving youth is known as youth participatory evaluation (YPE) (Hart & Rajbhandary, 2003). YPE was the approach used to evaluate Strong Links and is often associated with positive youth development, an approach used in the development and implementation of Strong Links. YPE aims to encourage positive youth development while also working to improve community programming (London & Zimmerman, 2003). This evaluation was meant to empower the girls while also strengthening the implementation and practice of Strong Links.

The methodology and approach of this evaluation will be further detailed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the participants, setting, study design, and methodology. The writing of this chapter was a collaborative process completed primarily by Lindsay Amper and Christina Tortolani, with some help from Amanda Allen.

Participants

This program evaluation was a collaborative effort of primarily Lindsay Amper and Christina Tortolani, with some help from Amanda Allen. They have worked alongside the RALLY program (Responsive Advocacy for Life and Learning in Youth) to develop a curriculum for urban middle school girls. All of the researchers came to this project with a masters’ degree in counseling and although each of their foci is different, all have a feminist and strength-based perspective. All three of the women researchers are Caucasian and are from different backgrounds than the girls in the program. Tortolani and Amper are from the suburbs of Rhode Island and Allen is from Tennessee. Cultural and racial differences were acknowledged and briefly discussed with the girls participating in the program. It was also important to be aware of the cultural differences during the interviews because it had the potential to impact the participants’ responses.

Gil Noam, the creator and director of the RALLY program, has served as a consultant and an advisor over the development and implementation of the program. He provided the researchers with access to girls in a school and is interested in using Strong Links in the RALLY program on a long term basis. Noam is a developmental and clinical psychologist who is interested in bolstering resiliency in youth. Noam’s interests intersected with the researchers on a number of points; however, his RALLY goals drove the developed curriculum more than originally intended. The RALLY goals changed over time, which provided for some difficulty in
keeping the curriculum. Despite the changes, the curriculum also reflected the researchers’ goals and desires. The current RALLY goals, which were reflected in this project’s curriculum, are to develop a sense of belonging, to develop assertiveness through voice or choice, and to use reflection and action through use of one’s body.

Sarah Bernhardt-Peterson is the on-site school coordinator for the RALLY program and was an important consultant and support during the running of the program. She is a licensed social worker and brings a strength-based perspective to the program as well. Sarah was integral to the success of this program because she initiated recruitment of girls and helped coordinate space at the school.

Additionally, Bernhardt-Peterson supervised the RALLY master’s level interns. The interns worked with the students in the school on a more regular basis and therefore were likely to have strong relationships with the girls. The RALLY practitioners worked three days a week in the school where this research took place. The practitioners were assigned to a classroom and were responsible for working with every student in their class in some capacity. They helped with school work, provided individual and group counseling services, communicated with students’ parents, and provided a number of additional psychosocial services. With the help of Bernhardt-Peterson, the researchers made an effort to involve the RALLY interns in this program by asking for their support in reminding the girls about the program and encouraging them to attend.

Other members of the school community were also minimally involved in this program. The teachers gave researchers access to students during homeroom for the project’s recruitment process. The teachers were from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and some have
an excellent rapport with students while others do not. School administrators were also involved; they assisted with room scheduling and coordination of special events and/or announcements.

Although all members of the school community were important, the members of Strong Links were the central focus of this evaluation. The members were 11 adolescent girls from an urban middle school in the Boston. (Demographic information is provided in the setting section.) The program was offered to RALLY and non-RALLY seventh and eighth grade girls. Although offering the program to two grade levels was not ideal, logistically this was the only way to ensure that the program would run. The program was conducted during the Period of Discovery hour on Wednesday afternoons when a number of competing groups ran simultaneously. The girls met as one large group with all three facilitators/evaluators present. Parents were informed about the program before the group began.

Setting

The identity of the school, school community, and surrounding communities where this research took place is being concealed to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The Concord School (a pseudonym) is in an urban setting in Massachusetts with a population of 36,293 people and median household income of $46,592 (state average is $49,959)(Unknown, 2008b). The urban area is made up of a number of distinct historical sub-districts of which there exist several significant Spanish-speaking populations from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. As of 2000, the ethnic make-up of Jamison was 50% Non-Hispanic White, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Black or African-American, 7% Asian-American, and 3% Other (Unknown, 2008a).

This urban neighborhood is a progressive community where culturally relevant businesses such as “botanicas” reflect the ethnic diversity of the community. In addition, the
Neighborhood Development Corporation represents the community’s commitment to planning and carrying out community development projects that benefit its low-income residents. Its mission is to revitalize their neighborhood as a healthy, diverse, and sustainable neighborhood through a comprehensive strategy of community empowerment, economic development, and affordable housing development.

The Concord School is one of 143 schools in the Boston School District. It serves K-8 and has approximately 650 students, 50.8% male and 49.2% female. Student to teacher ratio is 1:10. The students are 23.4% African American, 58.4% Hispanic, 13.2% white, 2.9% Asian, 0.4% native Hawaiian, 0.0% American Indian and 1.6% multi-race non-Hispanic. Approximately 51% of these students’ first language is not English, with 19.1% being categorized as “limited English proficient,” and 20.4% (n=122) receiving special education and 10.1% bilingual education. A majority of the students live in low-income households (78.4%) with 74% eligible for free lunch (as compared to the state average of 25.4%) (Unknown, 2008c). Many students in this school are bused in through the Boston school’s busing system from other urban Boston neighborhoods.

Student attendance rate is 90.5% which is below the state average of 94.8%. Approximately 87% of teachers are licensed in teaching and 86.7% of core academic teachers are identified as highly qualified (Unknown, 2007a). When compared with schools nationally and state-wide, using accountability standards determined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Concord School is struggling. Based on 2008 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data, Concord is in a restructuring phase for both English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. This means that the school failed to make adequate yearly progress in these areas and was subject to corrective action from the Massachusetts Department of Education. A consequence of its NCLB status is
that every child within the school is given the option to attend a school in the district that is meeting minimum standards, provided that such a school is available. Also based on 2008 AYP data, performance levels from ELA and mathematics were Low and Very Low, respectively. However, Concord is also on target to meet improvement goals (Unknown, 2008).

The school’s motto: “Nothing we do for children is ever wasted,” is exemplified by the strong relationships it has built with various community programs such as the RALLY program. Additionally, the school utilizes an “Advanced Work Class Program” that prepares students for examination schools. Finally, students’ parents and families are offered ESL and literacy classes (BPS, 2007).

**Materials**

*Informed consent and permission slips.* A packet containing consent forms were sent home with girls who enrolled in Strong Links. A copy of these forms can be found in the Northeastern University IRB application, which is located in Appendix A.

*Materials for groups.* The materials needed for the group projects varied depending on the activity of the specific group. These included a variety of arts and crafts material, including, but not limited to, glue, scissors, papers, markers, paint, magazines, and beads. A laptop computer was used for playing music. Each interview was typed or transcribed on one of the three researchers’ computers. Snacks, such as granola bars, crackers, and rice cereal treats were also provided for each group.

**Research Design**

Participatory action research (PAR) is a research methodology that seeks to understand people while also empowering them to make changes and to take action. PAR assumes that researchers are concurrently participants in the process because the only way to deeply know,
understand, and help people to make changes is to become involved in their lives. Researchers using the PAR framework seek engagement and mutual connection with the participants so that they can keep the participants’ voices as the central focus. By relationally engaging with participants and empathically listening to their stories, PAR helps empower participants to identify an issue in their lives and to make positive changes. In their research, rather than approaching participants as subjects to be studied, participatory action researchers focus on the relationship and on more deeply understanding individuals (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Fine, 1998; Fine, et al., 2003; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Mckelvey, 2003; Way, 1995).

The research design of this study was based on the PAR framework; more specifically, youth participatory evaluation (YPE) was used. This framework is compatible with giving marginalized individuals a voice and empowering them to be the experts on their own lives. Because the intent of this research project was to gain a deep understanding of girls’ experiences, to help the girls make changes, and to empower them to gain a voice; YPE was the most appropriate choice. As a result, the three researchers in this project also served as the program leaders. They led the groups each week and also collected the data. Because the evaluators were a consistent part of the group members’ lives, the hope was that the girls would be more willing to share their experiences with people they have come to know and trust. At the same time, as previously mentioned, it was important to attend to the cultural, racial, ethnic, and power differentials for the participants to feel comfortable being honest and open in their feedback.

**Procedures**

In spring of 2008, the researchers developed and ran a pilot program with 5-8 young women at the middle school where the evaluation occurred. The pilot program ran for six weeks and was used to help the researchers develop a curriculum that was developmentally appropriate,
interesting and helpful to the future participants. A series of questionnaires were used to gather information about what worked and what did not. The young women in the pilot program were not the girls in the program that was evaluated. Although their responses were not a part of this evaluation, their feedback helped the evaluators to understand the strengths and benefits of their programmatic ideas.

Following approval from Northeastern University Institutional Review Board, participant recruitment for this program occurred with assistance from RALLY staff in the school. Recruitment for this program occurred through word of mouth in the school and through presentations done by the researchers. Individuals that enrolled received a passive informed consent form that was sent to their homes. The evaluators explained the program and the informed consent form to the girls. The researchers met with the girls on a weekly basis for 6 weeks from April 2009 through June 2009.

Groups were approximately 50 minutes in length and were facilitated by at least two of the researchers. Weekly group topics were developed around four general themes and foci: self, relationships, understanding of meaningful events and coping and visions for the future. These topics were developed using the previously mentioned RALLY program goals, the interest areas of the research team, and information from the spring 2008 pilot group. A brief description of the program is described below. For a more detailed group curriculum, please see the complete curriculum in Appendix B.

Session 1: Assent, norms/rules, team-building games
Session 2: Relationships with peers/boys: connection versus disconnection
Session 3: Relationships with family: mutuality
Session 4: Meaningful events: Life stressors
Session 5: Meaningful events: Setting goals and being proactive

Session 6: Meaningful events: Setting goals and being proactive

Session 7: Meaningful events: Presenting their project from weeks five and six

Session 8: Our cultural selves

Session 9: Self: Who we are and where we come from

Session 10: Self and empowerment

Sessions 7-10 were eliminated due to changes in the school’s schedule. Session 6 was a celebration. Changes were also made to the curriculum throughout the program based on the girls’ feedback and response to the activities. The major adjustments are described in Chapter 4 and are consistent with the PAR/YPE approached utilized in this project.

The evaluation was designed to assess how the girls’ experienced strength-based arts programming. Semi-structured interviews were used during the first and last week of the program to help the evaluators to understand the girls’ lives before and after the group. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The first interview was typed because approval for tape recording was not initially included. However, the second interview was recorded and later transcribed. At the first meeting, the girls were reminded that participation was voluntary and their decision to participate was their right. The concept and limits of confidentiality were also discussed. Each of the evaluators took group process notes at the conclusion of the group. Each focused on the girls that they interviewed. To ensure anonymity, each girl was given a code name (a letter and number).

Although the evaluators worked as a team, each worked individually with several of the participants. The purpose of this approach was to help the girls to feel more strongly connected to at least one of the women leaders in the program. The participants were also provided with a
journal and were asked to record entries in it each week. Each researcher/mentor read and responded to their participant’s entries each week. The journal responses were used as data for the thematic analysis. Additionally, the three evaluators in this project used different measures to answer their own research questions. As a result, each researcher administered the combined protocol (interviews and questionnaires) to the youth she mentored.

Measures

The current study used a qualitative approach. The developmental assets framework was used for developing questions for before and after the group. This framework was used to help to determine the participants’ perceptions of their strengths, areas of difficulty, and any potential impact that the program had on the girls’ development, sense of self, and life changes (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were used because the evaluators wanted to the girls to talk about what they had on their minds. The semi-structured interview format allowed the evaluator to gather important information, but also created space for a more relational interchange between the researcher and the participants. The researchers also made changes to the program when information from interviews and interactions with participants suggested that the program could be improved to meet the girls’ needs. This approach was also used because it was consistent with the PAR/YPE approach.

The purpose of the pre-group interviews was to understand how the girls were coping with their life problems, to gather information on who their support systems were, to learn about their interests, and any struggles/concerns that they had. It was also important to understand if they were comfortable or familiar with arts of any kind. Some young women may prefer music to visual arts, and knowing their preferences may have an impact on how much they enjoy and benefit from certain activities. This study intended to build upon the girls’ strengths, so the pre-
group interview was important for gathering information about their developmental assets. The pre-group semi-structured interview protocol is located in Appendix C.

The purpose of the post-group interviews was to gather information about questions such as what the young women enjoyed/disliked about the arts within the program, if they had made any life changes, had any mood changes and improved peer or adult relationships. For more information on the interviews, please see Appendix D for the semi-structured interview protocol.

The journal responses and the researchers’ progress notes were additional sources of qualitative information. They were used to assess the girls’ feelings about the program and the use of the arts; to gather information about any life changes, and to determine if the program had a positive, negative, or no impact on them over the six weeks.

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative information from the semi-structured interviews, journals, and process notes were analyzed thematically. The research questions served as the categories and themes were developed within these categories. Thematic analysis is an inductive process because it originated from the raw data versus from theory or research (Maxwell, 1996). The purpose of using this method was to attempt to maintain each participant’s voice and to organize the group’s feedback to the greatest extent possible.

In keeping with the PAR/YPE approach, the information gleaned from the first interview was presented to the participants during the final interview. The participants were provided with an opportunity to comment on the researchers’ understanding of their stories. Changes were made as deemed appropriate based on these conversations. This approach to thematic analysis was used as a way to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the information obtained from the qualitative research process. Because time would not permit this strategy for the second
interview, another researcher was used to ensure that the developed themes were credible. After the themes were developed, the transcripts and the subsequent themes were given to another researcher so that she could either confirm or deny the described themes.

In qualitative program evaluation studies, there are a number of considerations that need to be made to ensure that the study is effective and credible. While traditional quantitative research studies focus on reliability and validity, qualitative program evaluation studies focus on: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. Utility means that the evaluation will meet the needs of the stakeholders requesting the evaluation. Feasibility standards are meant to encourage a realistic and practical evaluation. Propriety standards refer to the need for an ethical evaluation that serves the needs of the participants and the people impacted by the evaluation’s conclusions. Finally, accuracy standards are used to encourage the gathering and reporting of adequate information that reflects the worth of the program being evaluated (Ramlow, Unknown date).

For the purposes of this research, using another researcher to “check” the themes and the participants to confirm or deny their responses during the first interview were ways to adhere to accuracy standards. This project met propriety standards because the first goal was to develop a program that met the needs of the participants and to use the research to improve the efficacy of the program. The researchers are the stakeholders requesting the evaluation, so utility standards were not as great of a concern in this project. Feasibility standards were met because only two interviews were conducted with students in a six-week time period, which was a realistic and practical way to gather information.

**Conclusion**

The development and implementation of Strong Links was a collaborative effort between doctoral students. The final curriculum included many RALLY principles, as well as changes
that were made in response to the feedback received from the girls in the pilot program. A youth participatory evaluation was conducted to allow marginalized individuals an opportunity to be the expert on their own lives. This approach provided for an opportunity to gain deep understanding of the girls’ experiences in Strong Links. The thematic analysis derived from the interviews with the youth and supplemented from information gleaned from the girls’ journal entries and the researcher’s process notes, are presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Findings

The focus of this chapter is on the analysis of information obtained from the eleven girls who participated in the Strong Links program. A description of the members of Strong Links is presented, followed by the presentation of the findings. The presentation of the results is organized by research questions; therefore, each theme that emerged is discussed under the relevant research question.

Introduction

Thematic analysis was completed primarily from individual interviews; however, process recordings from the facilitators, the girl’s journal entries and their final forms of artistic expression were also used to inform this process. As stated in Chapter 3, the purpose of this thematic analysis was to understand the girls’ experiences in the Strong Links program. The priority of this analysis was to remain as true to the girls’ voices as possible, which is consistent with the participatory action evaluation, participatory action research and youth participatory evaluation process. Some of the themes included are specific to only one or two of the girls. The following are the four research questions that guided this analysis: 1.) Do the girls identify the arts-based interventions as an important part of their experiences within Strong Links? 2.) Has the use of arts contributed to the positive use of their voice? 3.) Do the girls prefer one expressive strategy over others? 4.) Do the girls report any negative experiences in Strong Links? The themes elucidated here will be organized by research question and are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The original analysis consisted of a very careful reading and rereading of the individual interviews. These readings produced a number of themes and subthemes, some of which fit across transcripts and others that were unique to one or two girls. For the purposes of this
chapter, the overarching themes will be introduced and the meaning gleaned from each subtheme and the integration of the other data is explained. For a more detailed, delineated list of themes and subthemes by each girl, please see Appendix E

The Girls

To understand the experiences of the girls in Strong Links, it is critical to contextualize their group experience with their lived experiences. A pre-group interview was conducted with each participant to gain a deeper understanding of who the girls were and what experiences they were bringing to Strong Links.

For the purposes of preserving confidentiality, the girl’s actual names are not used in this document; the pseudonyms for the eleven girls in Strong Links are: Tina, Alexia, Synthia, Ina, Maria, Kristen, Kendra, Mabelle, Adrie, Nina, and April. The final interview for Nina was not completed due to her repeated absences at the end of the school year. Tina’s final interview was not recorded because she expressed discomfort with that process and her personal wish was honored. The following is a broad description of the members of this group.

The participants in this program were primarily from one seventh-grade homeroom. As a result, many of the girls had pre-established relationships. Adrie was the only seventh grader in the group from a different homeroom and the other girls in the group had some negative preconceived notions about her, which they expressed during the initial interviews and in their reactions to her in group. During group, they sometimes snickered at her and generally avoided sitting next to her at first. Nina and April were the only two eighth-grade girls who participated in group. Although April did not have any previous relationships with girls in the group, Nina and Kendra had just recently been in conflict that required help from the school guidance department. Many of the girls indicated that they joined Strong Links because of its association
with RALLY, a program that they liked very much. The girls in this program identified themselves as being from a variety of cultures and race/ethnicities, including El Salvadorian, Haitian, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Brazilian, and the Dominican. There was one Caucasian girl in the group. Their ages ranged from 12–14.

During the first interview, the researchers learned much about the experiences of the girls. In talking about their families, they spoke of the varying compositions of their homes. Several of the girls were being raised by single mothers with multiple children in the home. April spoke of the pain that she felt in living without her father both in this initial interview and later in her journal. Like many other girls, she lacked the presence of her father because he was still living in their country of origin. Two girls were being raised by their fathers; one with the assistance of her grandmother and the other with a step-mother. One of the girls expressed the struggles that she felt around managing a life with a step-mother whom she disliked and whom she perceived as disliking her. Still, some of the girls lived at home with both parents and their siblings. Many of the girls talked about parts of their family as being a source of stress, and at the same time, most of the girls also indicated that their family was their strongest relationship and support. This provides important information about their home life, because even though many of them missed their absent mothers or fathers, or disliked a step-parent, somebody in their family often served as a role model and/or an important support. Several of the girls cited their family as being an important part of their life because they were there for them no matter what happened and also understood their history in a way that nobody else could.

Gaining an understanding of their experiences in and views of their neighborhoods is also important, given that this is where they spend most of their time outside of school. All of the girls in Strong Links lived in a city neighborhood within Boston. Given that Boston
neighborhoods have more crime rates than surrounding suburban areas, it is important to understand the girls’ experience of urban living (*Part one crime reported by the Boston Police Department by Offense and by District/Area*, 2008). In fact, many of the girls reported that they did not always feel safe in their neighborhood. They referenced gang activity, “shooting,” being stopped by random boys to buy drugs, and being hooted at by males, as sources of discomfort in their neighborhoods. One participant was particularly worried about violence because her brother was involved in a gang. As a result of their experiences, many of the girls had developed a method for dealing with their discomfort by walking with others to increase their feelings of safety. At the same time, a few of the girls felt that their particular neighborhoods usually felt safe and that this was not a source of concern for them. This finding points to the importance of not making gross generalizations about urban girls, urban communities, and people’s experiences within urban environments. There are always within group differences that must be recognized and honored.

In spite of this, on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most stressed, the girls mean stress rating was a 5 with a range of 2.5 to 9. The girls could identify a number of different stressors, including too much responsibility within the family such as babysitting younger siblings or helping with housework. Two girls focused on their father’s rules and “strictness” as a source of stress. Many also talked in detail about “drama” in middle school between friends and peers. They described the tensions between girls who go after your boys, and rumors that are spread through the school. According to the girls, these rumors were meant to harm a girl’s reputation. This usually meant making up rumors about girls having sexual contact with certain boys. According to the girls who addressed this in their interviews and during group, boys were also known for having sex with a girl and then talking about it in school. This was described as
being mortifying for the girls. Interestingly, nobody mentioned their neighborhood or violence as a stressor. Perhaps this was because they had identified ways to manage the stress in their neighborhood. A more focused description of each participant is described below.

Who They are and What They Bring

A brief description of each girl’s perceived strengths, weaknesses, goals for the future, interest in art, and ways of managing feelings is included. These specifics are included because it provides context for understanding the thematic analysis as it relates to each participant.

**Maria.** Maria focused on school for both her strengths and weaknesses, indicating that she was excellent in history but struggled in math. She wants to either be a nurse or a hip hop dancer when she grows up. She expressed previous interest in and comfort with art and had mentioned participating in a similar program when she lived in Florida. Maria indicated that she generally remained quiet when she was upset.

**Ina.** Ina indicated that her strengths were school and baseball but that she struggled with math, volleyball, and her relationship with her sister. When she grows up she wants to be a veterinarian. Ina indicated that she likes and is comfortable with art making. Like Maria, she indicated that she generally stays quiet when she is upset but noted that when she is angry she tends to cry.

**Mabelle.** Mabelle indicated that her strengths were that she was caring and that she was fashionable. She noted that she struggled with math and with her relationships with her siblings. When she grows up she wants to be a fashion designer. She indicated that she felt comfortable with art activities. In regards to expression, Mabelle was conflicted, saying that she often was reluctant to express her anger; however, she has yelled when she was upset.
Kristen. Kristen indicated that her strength was expressing herself and being nice to others. With that said, Kristen noted that she struggled with being shy. Kristen wants to be a pediatrician when she grows up. She said that she was comfortable with art and stressed that she loved drama. Kristen expressed her anger by crying and/or screaming.

Adrie. Adrie noted that singing and getting good grades were strengths for her but admitted that getting into trouble for being loud and getting into others’ business was a struggle. Adrie wants to be a lawyer when she grows up. Like the other girls she said that she felt comfortable with art. Adrie again focused on being loud and said that when she was upset she tended to yell at people.

Alexia. Alexia indicated that she was good in kickball but could not identify any struggles. Alexia wants to be a pediatrician when she grows up. Although Alexia identified an interest and aptitude in music and arts and crafts, she specifically noted her dislike of writing. Alexia indicated that she watched television when she was upset and yelled when she was angry.

April. April indicated that her strengths were that she was talkative and helpful but that she struggled with sports. She wants to be a detective when she grows up. April indicated that she did not like art and joined Strong Links because of RALLY. She admitted that when she was upset she did not express her emotions.

Synthia. Synthia identified her sense of humor as a strength for her and identified school as a struggle. Synthia would also like to be a veterinarian when she grows up. Synthia did not express much interest or aptitude in art, and said that she preferred active activities. She noted that she liked dance, an activity that was not included in Strong Links. She joined the group not because of the art but because of her friends. Synthia expressed her distaste of crying in front of other people, but noted that when she is upset this was generally how she showed her feelings.
**Nina.** Nina’s perceived strengths were in baseball and dancing; whereas she indicated low self-esteem as a struggle. Nina identified being a meteorologist as her career goal. She expressed interest and comfort in writing and music but indicated being uncomfortable with other forms of artistic expression. Like many of the other girls, Nina cried to express anger.

**Kendra.** Kendra’s perceived strengths were her ability to guide her peers and a talent for dancing. She indicated that her attitude is a struggle for her. Although Kendra expressed interest in many different forms of art expression she said that she did not always feel comfortable doing them. Kendra expressed interest in two different careers: an equestrian or a veterinarian. Kendra also indicated that she vacillated between both keeping her emotions to herself and blowing up in anger.

**Tina.** Tina perceived herself as being a good, trustworthy person but felt that she struggled with school. Like many of the other girls, Tina expressed interest in becoming either a pediatrician or a veterinarian. Tina said that she liked and was comfortable with forms of art and musical expression. Tina talked about wanting to be able to express how she was feeling and noted that when she was angry she screamed and cried.

This background information is meant as a way to contextualize the girl’s experiences. Additional information on each of the girls will be included in the discussion of the results.

*The Shared Development of Strong Links: PAR and YPE in Action*

As referenced in Chapter 3, the first phase of the curriculum development began with a pilot group. A series of changes were made based on the girls’ feedback to create the curriculum used in Strong Links. Although the overall structure and themes remained the same (i.e., check-in, music, snacks), the content of each session evolved to match the girls’ input. Finally, based
on the experiences of the girls, co-researchers, and RALLY colleagues, the curriculum was finalized and is included in Appendix B with the original curriculum.

The following is a reflection of how the girls influenced the changes of the program. The information presented below came from the facilitators/researchers group process notes.

Week 1:

- The girls arrived sporadically and some seemed hesitant to enter the classroom. They sat around the table, joking with one another, but not really interacting with group leaders. Two facilitators began the group, but the girls seemed hesitant to begin talking about rules and barely spoke. When the third facilitator walked in with food the entire mood of the group changed. The girls became vibrant and talkative, but also jumped for the food; demonstrating difficulty sharing the food with their peers.
- Following the game, Lindsay brought up the treasure boxes. The room filled with screams of joy, “Are we decorating those?!?” The girls clamored to get their hands on the boxes that they wanted, and asked if they would be able to start today. They were also excited about the beading project that was introduced, and were eager to pick their first bead out. The energy in the room dramatically increased.

This session led to a number of realizations and ultimately, changes to the curriculum:

1. The didactic nature of the rule-setting was not effective. It seemed the girls needed a visual and concrete way to express their opinions. As a result, rather than simply writing the rules that they had come up with on a poster, we shifted this part of the project to a hand collage. The girls each traced their hands and wrote expectations or rules that they wanted for the group on their hands. During the evaluation period, one of the girls offered a suggestion to improve this activity even more by having each girl make their own hand in their own space. She suggested that this would help reduce chaos. This change was made in the final iteration of this curriculum.
2. Snacks had a big impact on the mood and the energy of the group. However, with the increased energy came arguments about sharing the food. Future sessions were modified so that snacks were more structured and each girl was given a certain helping. This systematic process of providing snacks seemed to reduce anxiety and conflict surrounding getting food. Rather than yelling at each other, each girl waited for their snack and offered it to others if they were not hungry.
3. Again, it was clear that talking was not as powerful as action. Based on their unenthusiastic response when there was discussion of the planned activities, a more hands on, visual approach was used. For example, the wooden boxes were shown to them instead of just talking about the activity.

Week 4:

- The girls, with the exception of Adrie, who arrived first, trickled in today. An attempt was made at moving their seats so that they would socialize with other girls. Some
Complied, but others asked to move their seat, which was permitted. The atmosphere was very lively today. The girls were clearly socializing with each other and appeared to be mixing with different girls more today as a result of the seat changes.

- The girls sat down and immediately began working on their hope boxes. April stated, “You guys never give us enough time to finish these.” Many of the girls were reluctant to put their projects away again. It took time to get them to put away items.
- When it came time to transition from the hope box to a conversation around stress, Maria asked if we could talk about sex. The facilitators agreed to this as long as this was what the girls wanted to discuss. The girls obviously needed to discuss this today, as many of them quickly picked up on the conversation.
- Maria asked if you had sex with a lot of people were you a “ho”? Lindsay threw that question back to the group. The girls seemed to think that if you had sex with a lot of different people who did not care about you, you might be. Lindsay encouraged them to think about the difference standards for girls and boys. They again picked up on this conversation, stating that boys were considered “cool” if they had sex with lots of people. Many of the girls focused on this “good girl” phenomenon and on being a virgin. All of the girls insisted that they were virgins and this seemed to be an important point to communicate. At the same time, many of the girls were smirking when saying this. They used the word “innocent” over and over again; each one arguing that they were “innocent” and that another girl was not.
- When Christina asked them about linking sex with stress, they noted that sex could cause stress but also reduce stress. Christina also asked if it was more stressful for girls, and they noted that it could lead to pregnancy or STDs and that the guy would leave. One of the girls stated that it’s the guy’s responsibility too, but others reminded her that guys can leave and often do.
- There was no time to introduce the activity on stress today. The girls obviously needed time to talk about this topic and had a lot to say. The conversation transitioned to other forms of stress, aside from sex, which they said included siblings, parents, and homework.

This session led to a number of realizations and ultimately, changes to the curriculum:

1. Most of the girls showed great interest and enthusiasm over their hope boxes. They wanted to spend time designing them and working on them. They expressed disappointment over being asked to transition to other activities each week rather than working on them for an entire group period. Transitioning them to other activities in the group time was extremely challenging. As a result, the final iteration of the curriculum was altered to meet the girls’ needs. The final curriculum has the girls complete the hope boxes over two group periods rather than weaving this project throughout the entire group.

2. Sometimes, the plan for the day needs to be abandoned based on the needs of the group. In this case, the plan was to talk about stress and to make clay runes. When this topic was introduced, the girls asked to talk about sex instead. This request was honored because it was clear that this was a topic that the girls needed to talk about. The girls did make a link between sex and stress, which was highlighted by Christina. They were also able to continue talking about other topics that also produced stress. The second half of this
conversation was initiated after two of the girls in group asked to move on from the topic because it made them feel uncomfortable. So, the facilitators honored both the majority and the minority requests in this group, altering as needed to fit the participant’s needs.

These are just two examples of how PAR and YPE influenced the outcome and development of Strong Links.

**Thematic Analysis**

*Arts as an Important Part of their Experience?*

*Theme I: Learning and growing.* Although the reported experiences of the girls in the Strong Links groups varied, most of the girls indicated in their interviews that the expressive activities and processes facilitated the learning of new skills. It became evident through conversations with the girls during pre-group interviews, in group, and post-group interviews, that most of the girls struggled with managing and expressing their anger effectively. One of the activities completed during group was the making of clay runes with symbols carved into them that represented a range of words like faith, love, hope, and anger. In this activity, the girls were prompted to choose a symbol that represented something that they struggled with or were working on improving in themselves. They were also asked to choose another symbol that they felt was an area of competency for them. The girls learned how to use these for grounding and stress management.

Many of the girls translated this activity into a tool that they could use to deal with their anger more effectively. For instance, Kristen explained how she learned to deal with her anger through the use of the runes.

*Interviewer:* Has Strong Links been helpful to you in learning to manage stress?
*Kristen:* Yeah like I don’t have to hit things, like you can look at this [the rune] and be reminded that you have faith and stuff like that.

*Interviewer:* So when we met a few weeks ago you said when you are upset you express your feelings by talking about it, yelling, and crying. Do you think that anything has changed?
Kristen: When I get mad at other people, instead I can use this [the rune]. I can touch it instead of yelling and screaming.

Synthia’s purpose for the runes was similar to Kristen’s. When she was asked to explain why she carved the symbol for anger onto her runes she said, “Anger, because like I said before, I don’t get mad much, but when I do I get really, really mad. I don’t know, like, I don’t think about what I’m doing I just do it.” She indicated during her interview that the runes have helped her to curb her impulsivity when she is angry.

Kendra also thought that the expressive activities helped her manage her anger. Her journey with anger included learning new skills for coping, but was also about being introspective and thinking about self-improvement. When asked to comment on the picture of her hope box and runes, Kendra said the following during her interview:

So I decided to make the hope box and the things in there [runes that symbolize anger], um, because I think it could help me improve the way that I act and the way that I am, and I think that it could actually help me figure out what are my struggles in life. The little clay things, I chose anger, because sometimes anger is my weakness and like I get so angry, I go berserk everywhere, I just can’t hold it. I thought it was good to pick that anger piece because anger is what I have trouble with the most. I think I’ve grown from, let’s say black to like gray because I’m not the way I used to be before and I’ve changed a lot.

Kendra’s expressions illustrate that she has used the expressive activities in a very mindful way. Her learning went beyond the use of the runes. Kendra used the hope box as a means to work on anger as well. For this activity, the girls were asked to design a box with symbols, words, art, colors that represented hope to them. She thought carefully about her color choices during the painting, using this as a means to think about her own growth and development. She also thought carefully about the rune symbols that would be most helpful to self-improvement.
Ina felt that the journal activities were helpful in managing her anger. One journal prompt was to write a letter to somebody in their life with whom they have been unable to talk to about something. In response to this, Ina wrote an apology to her sister for being mean to her. When asked about her feelings regarding journal writing, she commented on the utility of expressing yourself in writing so that you could release your feelings. During her pre-group interview, Ina had commented on her sister as being a source of stress and somebody who made her feel very angry. Ina also learned how to manage her fearful reactions to her father’s anger or disapproval of her behaviors. In response to a question about whether she had grown or learned anything after completing the expressive projects, she said, “Yeah, cause like the runes, I’m always going to remember them, if I’m scared I can get it and remember [to calm myself down].” In fact, in her pre-interview, Ina mentioned that her father had very strict rules on dating and that he had become so angry in the past about her kissing a boy, that he cut her hair. She believed that this was because he wanted her to “look ugly.”

In addition to learning skills for managing their anger, several of the girls talked about how the expressive activities helped them to grow in their understanding of who they were and how they viewed others. A poignant example of this comes from Adrie, a seventh grader who came from a different homeroom than the other seventh graders. From the start of group it was clear that the other girls did not think highly of her. In her pre-group interview, Adrie admitted that she only had one friend who went to another school and that she often got into fist fights with other kids in school. She said that she fought with other kids because of the remarks that they made about her. During group, she showed the facilitators her struggles through her behaviors. She was loud, disruptive, and commanded quite a bit of negative attention. She often
tested the boundaries with the group leaders and could be oppositional. In fact, during her pre-group interview she indicated that this was a problem for her.

Reviewing the process notes from the group facilitators provided insight into Adrie’s progress during Strong Links. It was an exciting process to watch her interactions with others slowly change. For instance, in the beginning of the group she required frequent redirection and needed many limits placed on her. She made little effort to connect with the leaders and could be pushy with the other girls. However, as the group progressed Adrie needed less redirection and actually began to offer her help to the facilitators. Additionally, while making the hope box, Adrie combined paint to come up with a new color. This lavender color was admired by and later shared with her peers. This connection with her peers and the positive feedback that she received from both the facilitators and the other girls clearly made Adrie feel special and validated. She expressed this through her affect, when she looked bright and excited, but also through the shift in usually disruptive behavior to being a cooperative and helpful member of the group.

During Adrie’s final interview, she was asked if she thought that anything had changed in the way that she feels, thinks, and acts since the beginning of group because of the art projects. Adrie’s response was:

*Adrie:* I didn’t change the way I act but the way I feel.
*Interviewer:* Have you learned anything about yourself?
*Adrie:* Yes.
*Interviewer:* Can you name one thing?
*Adrie:* Like I am better than most people think I am.
*Interviewer:* So you feel better about who you are? Do you feel people make judgments about you? In group did you feel that people knew you on a deeper level beyond judgments?
*Adrie:* Yeah.

Adrie was able to feel better about herself as a result of her experiences in Strong Links. The art projects helped to facilitate a connection between herself and her peers. Consequently, when
April was asked about any changes that occurred as a result of the expressive activities, she noted that she has changed her perspective on judging others. She was particularly affected by the role-play activity in which the girls experimented with perspective taking and communication in relationships. In this activity the girls’ role played difficult relationships and helpful responses that people could make.

Maria was impacted by the human knot activity. This activity, in which kids stand in a circle, hold hands, and have to untangle the “knot,” was used as a metaphor for relationships. After the experiential activity was completed, a conversation was facilitated on “knotty” relationships and ways of managing them more effectively. This conversation focused on relationships with boys and with the girls’ mothers. In response to the question on change and growth as a result of the expressive activities, Maria noted that it was helpful to her in changing her perspective and her actions surrounding dating. She said that her friends often reminded her of what they talked about in Strong Links regarding relationships and encouraged her to focus on her schoolwork instead of boys. It became quite clear during the interview and during her discussions in group, that relationships with boys were a source of conflict and stress for Maria. For instance, on the day that the topic of stress was introduced, Maria asked, “Can we talk about sex?” and then continued with, “If you have sex with a lot of boys, does that make you a ‘ho’?” In the final interview, she referenced past mistakes and the regret that she felt over decisions she had made with boys. Despite her regret, Maria indicated that the group discussions had helped her to make positive life changes. Regarding boys, Maria said, “And now I’m single and fine, I’m doing my work. I’m doing pretty fine in school.”

In addition to stating that the expressive activities helped them to learn new skills, develop coping mechanisms, make positive changes, and to grow in their understanding of self
and others, several girls pointed to the importance of having the art serve as a tangible reminder of what they had gained and learned from their experience in Strong Links. In regards to the hope box that was completed during Strong Links, Maria said, “It actually means something and that’s to remind themselves of what we did back in middle school and what we learned. So yeah, that was a good activity.”

Maria and Kristen talked about the creation of the hope box as being helpful to them in thinking and planning for the future. They appeared to be the only two participants who grew in terms of thinking about their future. When asked about if the hope box was helpful to her in thinking about her future, she commented on the utility of looking through magazines for role models for the future.

**Theme 2: Therapeutic benefits of expressive activities.** In addition to learning new skills and making positive changes in their lives, many of the girls experienced the direct benefit of the expressive process during group. The expressive process allowed multiple girls the opportunity to process feelings and/or conflicts. For instance, when asked to explain her color choices, Maria explained that she used colors to express a conflict that she was feeling. She said:

Black I chose because sometimes I have anger inside so it’s like I see blackness inside of me and then I chose yellow as like the bright side of me. Sometimes I have ideas and I’m like a good person. So I chose those two colors because like black to me is like when I have anger and I sometimes do stuff that I wish I want back and never did. And then I chose yellow because yellow is like a bright side of me that I’m a good person even though I do things that I should not be doing. I think that I’m a good person, so I chose those two colors.

Maria was able to make meaning of the internal conflict within her. In fact, half of the girls said that the expressive processes helped them to release emotions.

Ina said that after she wrote a letter to her sister in her journal, she felt better about herself and also felt better because she got her thoughts out. She explained this in response to a
question about the utility of having the facilitator as a mentor. Ina felt that it was helpful to express her feelings towards her sister to her mentor, who commented on this in her journal. In response to a question about the benefits of journaling, Mabelle felt similarly to Ina, stating, “It feels like all that stuff is being put on that paper, like even though it's not directly talking to somebody, you feel better after you write it out.” Kendra’s response to the benefits of journaling was similar, stating that “It’s better to express it in a journal than hold it in and holding grudges in the mind.”

Processing emotions was one of the direct benefits named by the girls; however, a relaxation response was also an important component of a number of girls’ experiences in the group. When asked whether any feelings surfaced for her while working on the hope box, Kristen stated that, “If you had a stressful day, all you had to do was go work on your box,” suggesting that the process of painting helped her to let go of the stresses from the day.

Although this was true for several girls, a more unanimous response to the art/expressive experience in Strong Links was that it was fun! When asked about what she learned from making the hope box, Adrie communicated that the art helped her to not “always be down.” In response to a question about what she liked about making the hope box, Synthia responded, “It was fun. To me it was fun, like we would play around with that glitter thing.” While taking pleasure in activities may not seem that important, the girls’ excitement for the projects was one of the reasons that they likely came back each week. In fact, after the facilitators provided the girls with their wooden boxes on the first day of Strong Links, the climate in the room shifted completely. Reflection from process notes indicated that on the first day, the girls were distant, quiet, and appeared hesitant and uneasy. The moment the art and the snack were introduced, the girls’ energy level dramatically increased. They seemed eager and excited about the projects and the
nourishment. In fact on the second day, all of the girls were waiting outside of the designated room for the facilitators and eagerly entered the room. This was a stark contrast from the first day when the facilitators spent at least ten minutes trying to get the girls into the room and into a seat.

**Theme 3: Relationships.** In addition to introducing the expressive activities as being helpful for them in working through thoughts and feelings in their internal world, the girls indicated that the expressive activities had an impact on their relationships. This was true for building relationships with the people in group, working on outside relationships, and helping them to learn how to take perspectives in relationships.

Regarding relationships inside of the group, half of the girls enjoyed the chance to participate in a team-building activity. They expressed an interest in collaboration and in working on a goal that was bigger than any one individual’s goal. For instance, in response to a question about what she liked or disliked about the human knot activity, Synthia stated, “That was good. It had things about teamwork to show that you shouldn’t be the only, the dictator I think. Like, um, so like work along with your friends and your classmates also.” In response to the same question, Mabelle replied, “… because we had to use teamwork in order to get out of the situation and be in a circle.”

Similarly, half of the girls indicated that the expressive activities facilitated and deepened the connection between themselves and their peers. In response to the question, “Did any feelings come up for you while you were doing this [hope box], after you did it, or during discussion about it [hope box] in the group?” Tina answered, “Yeah, I felt happy to do the project and happy because there are people who I trust now, in the group that I didn’t know before.” Given that Tina identified learning to trust others as a struggle for her, this is an
especially significant statement for her to make. It is interesting, however, that during the creation of the hope box she sat exclusively with Synthia. Based on observation, it seemed that she was not interested in forming other relationships; however, this may have been a reflection of her lack of trust. Although she sat with Synthia, all the girls talked with one another while they were painting. It may be that the open group conversations during the painting activity helped Tina to feel more connected to other peers aside from Synthia, a friend she had previous to joining Strong Links. April, a girl from the eighth grade, who was not friends with any of the girls before group, felt that Strong Links facilitated friendships for her. This is especially important for her because she indicated during the pre-group interview that she had few, if any, real friendships.

When Maria was asked about what she liked about the human knot activity, she commented on the benefit that it had in repairing broken relationships between two girls. Although it is unlikely that the human knot resolved all of the conflict between two of the members, it is important to include Maria’s perception of the benefit that this team building activity had for the connection between the girls.

While only Kendra felt that the group had a significant impact on her relationships outside of group, her experience is important to include. When asked about whether or not her experiences with the expressive activities facilitated any changes for her, Kendra identified the human knot and the ensuing discussion as having helped her to improve her relationships. It is important to note that Kendra had a very strong voice during this activity and focused heavily on her relationship with her boyfriend. She was able to engage the group in a conversation about ways to work on the “knots” in relationships with boys. She also indicated that the role-play activity had contributed to a change in her perspective-taking ability with relationships. She said
the following about how she changed, “Now I understand that you just got to look at the big picture, have to look at it from different angles.” Her interviewer stated, “So you are saying you learned to take others perspectives,” to which she answered, “Yes, basically.” Although only indirectly related, as previously mentioned, this activity impacted Maria’s perception of dating. However, as opposed to impacting her current relationships, Maria identified the knot activity as helpful for her in making choices about dating relationships in the future.

While a few of the other girls talked about the benefit of having their mentor respond to them in their journal, only Kendra addressed this process as a way to feel connected to the facilitator responding to her. For Kendra, this process took the form of a mentorship relationship and facilitated a connection between her and her mentor.

Theme 4: Individuality and self-efficacy. Although the girls stressed the benefit of the expressive process and activities on helping them with their relationships, almost all of the girls talked about the importance of expressing their individuality through the arts. They emphasized the significance of choosing images/colors/words that expressed a unique aspect of their personality and were meticulous about their design. For instance, in response to a question about what Mabelle liked about the hope box she said,

_Mabelle:_ That I got to design the box...
_Interviewer:_ So what kind of process went into designing the box?
_Mabelle:_ I don’t know...putting in stuff that’s about me I guess.
_Interviewer:_ Yeah, so what do you mean, putting in stuff that is about you? What represents you here?
_Mabelle:_ The flowers because I am cheerful…me ‘cause of course, it’s about me...and then I don’t really like the color pink—I like purple—but I thought the pink would go with the purples, so...

Given that Mabelle was interested in fashion and design, it was particularly fitting that she designed the box according to how the colors would coordinate.
Kristen also enjoyed the creative process involved in making the hope box. She said that she enjoyed, “putting my own edge on it—like putting your own spin on it.” Maria stressed the idea of expressing one’s individuality, but emphasized the choice that she and the rest of the girls were provided in choosing their own beads and making their own designs. Kendra echoed Maria’s views, stating that “We got to, like, got to design it the way that we wanted it, put it the way we wanted to do it. It was fun.” The girls’ emphasis on individuality is important given that they also had a desire to fit in. There was some tension between a need for individuality but also acceptance; a tension that is common to most people but can be especially pertinent for adolescents. For instance, when Adrie created the purple color paint many of the girls quickly changed the colors of their boxes once the first person stated that they liked the color. When one girl announced that they hated the color pink, many of the other girls quickly announced their distaste of this as well; even if it was the color they had painted their box. Despite their desire to fit in, their finished products ended up looking unique. Although they adopted some of the group ideas, they were also able to maintain a sense of individuality.

Their ability to use their own sense of creativity and to put the time and effort into the artistic process instilled a sense of pride in at least two of the girls. When asked about what the girls were most proud of after completing the group, April talked eloquently about her process in making the hope box:

> Interviewer: Yeah? What makes you proud of it?
> April: I didn't think that I was going to be able to do it right.
> Interviewer: Hm. What do you mean? What were you afraid was going to happen?
> April: That it would be sloppy. Yeah.
> Interviewer: But it turned out that you weren't.
> April: That is why I took my time.

In fact, during the group April worked meticulously and quietly on the hope box. Even if other girls were talking loudly and being distracting, April focused intensely on her project. This
process helped her to develop a sense of self-efficacy because she worked hard on a project and learned that she was able to complete it successfully.

Although Adrie did not report any pride as a result of her work, she was able to look at her hope box, and when asked what she saw, to identify the hard work that she put into it. Given her enthusiasm for this project it is important that she was able to give herself credit for her hard work.

*Have the Arts Contributed to a Positive Use of their Voice?*

This question sought to explore the relationship between the use of art and the expression of the girls’ opinions, thoughts and feelings.

*Theme I: Art as facilitator.* Within the context of the group environment, nearly all of the girls commented on the facilitative effect that creating art or participating in expressive activities had on their self-expression. When the interviewer asked Ina about whether creating art helped her to talk about more difficult topics, Ina responded “Yeah, because you could express yourself through the art and be more accountable, express it better.” She was alluding to the idea that sometimes verbally communicating ideas and thoughts can be difficult, but that one’s art is a true reflection of one’s thoughts and/or feelings.

Kristen felt similarly and when asked that same question, stated that working on the hope box while talking about sensitive issues made it, “better because you didn’t have to focus on that. You didn’t have to just sit there and focus on that [the conversation].” She took this concept a step further when she was asked about how, if at all, the art projects helped her to grow as an individual. Kristen indicated that she had become more open as a result of the expressive activities. Mabelle’s views echoed that of Kristen and Ina. She believed that the arts served as a
distraction so that individuals’ who were usually uncomfortable discussing their personal lives were able to participate in the conversation.

Several of the girls felt very strongly about using the art as a direct communication vehicle. Alexia, who was the most silent member of the group, talked briefly about this in her interview. When asked about how she expressed her feelings, she indicated that verbal communication was not her choice; rather that she used music. During the group, Alexia rarely spoke with the other girls and hardly ever volunteered her opinion. While her social interactions were minimal, Alexia always worked carefully and quietly on her projects. Although at the time it was difficult to make a connection with her or even to assess her level of enjoyment, it may be that this type of group was particularly effective for her, given her lack of interest or ability to use verbal communication.

As previously mentioned, Maria talked about the importance of her hope box in her ability to express her feelings. In response to the question, “Do you think that any of those activities helped you with being able to express your feelings or learning how to express them,” she reminded the interviewer of her color choices with the box. She said, “Remember I told you that? Because when I think of yellow and black I think I should do this better or I shouldn’t do this or that. So I think that activity was the main one that got me to express myself a little bit more.” Although Maria was quite verbal during group, her creation of the hope box allowed her to express an internal conflict that she was having and was unable to talk about directly. Maria was able to ask an overarching question during group about sex; however, she was unable to express her personal internal conflicts verbally regarding this subject. The art provided her with the space to express and work on this challenge.
Similar to the theme of individuality addressed under the first research question, many of the girls used their art projects as a means to use their voice nonverbally. Their voice refers to their ability to express who they are and what they believe. Their individual beliefs, thoughts, desires, and likes were reflected through their art. When asked about what she felt proud of when she looked at her hope box, Ina responded, “I think the way that I didn’t do it like the other people, I just did it my own way.” Ina was proud of her individuality of expression. Kristen’s sense of individuality and originality was recognized by the girls in the group, who admired her creativity and asked her for help in designing their boxes. Her interviewer asked her how she felt about being asked for help by other group members. Kristen responded with excitement. She said that she was happy because she had thought of an original idea and that made her feel good. When asked about what she liked about the art activities, Maria talked about the importance of having choice in design because of her previous negative experiences in other girls groups where the adults mandated design. It is clear that the girls enjoyed having a space to be creative and to express who they were through their art.

*Theme 2: Anger management.* Managing anger was a particularly challenging experience for most of the girls. Dealing with anger surfaced as a topic under the first research question; however, its meaning is slightly different when looked at from the perspective of art and voice. Through experience with the girls in group and in talking to them during the interviews, it became clear that both physical and verbal fighting were somewhat commonplace occurrences for many of them. As a result of this group, many of the girls talked about replacing the physical and verbal aggression with calm conversation. As addressed in the previous section, the girls identified coping skills to calm them before they went “berserk,” “cried,” or got into a major
fight. When asked if she learned anything new about how girls could handle conflict, Kristen suggested that an alternative to yelling was to “sit down and talk about it.”

In response to a question about the value of the human knot, Kendra articulated the benefit that this had on managing her anger when she was in conflict in a relationship. She said,

Like say if you got into an argument or something with one of your friends, how would you solve it basically? You could do it the good way instead of the bad way. Going up to that person and talking to them about that problem, like, you are not confronting that person, but you are being a nice person, asking them what is their problem or if there is a way that you could make it better?

Like several of the other girls, she talked about alternatives to yelling, gossiping, or to becoming physically aggressive. When asked to talk about her hope box and her runes, Kendra also identified the need to work on first controlling her anger before she acted on it. This was a necessary precursor to using her voice effectively because as she put it, “I get so angry, I go berserk everywhere, I just can’t hold it.” She identified using the runes, journaling, and getting advice from an adult as a way to calm herself down. In response to a question about the utility of the journals, Kendra commented, “What you wrote back was very honest and that’s the way that I felt and you just commented back and gave me your opinion. It was very helpful to me. I think if you weren’t honest I would have ended up hurting her, and it calmed me down.” Rather than acting on her anger and using physical aggression, Kendra learned to seek advice first and then use her voice in the way she described above to resolve conflict with peers.

In addition to Kendra, a couple of girls addressed the utility of the journals in helping them to organize their thoughts and to gain perspective on a situation when they were upset. Mabelle noted that she wrote her thoughts to her journal first before she shared her views with others. This helped her to use her voice more effectively because it gave her the chance to think about what she needed to say. Ina commented on the benefit of using her journal to help her with
getting her wording correct. She expressed her desire to “think about it before I say it” so that she does not say something that would cause a misunderstanding. Again, Ina pointed to the importance of using her voice effectively to communicate with others.

**Theme 3: My strong voice outside of group.** Although the other themes allude to the impact that the group has had on the girls’ lives outside of group, it seems important to highlight this theme independent of the others. Almost all of the girls said that the expressive activities taught them how to use their voice in a positive way in their lives outside of the group. In reaction to the question, “Do you think your experience in the group has changed or impacted your relationship outside of the group at all?” Ina responded, “Yeah, yeah, I’ve been nicer to her [sister] now.” Ina talked about feeling badly about yelling at her sister. She found journaling helpful for managing her feelings about and behaviors toward her sister.

When asked to describe the hope box, Maria referenced the colors of her hope box as a reminder of her “good and bad” sides. Maria talked in length about a few boys who approached her after school and attempted to talk her into stealing. Maria had thought about participating, but thought back to when she made the box. She said,

I was like, that’s why I put down the color yellow, I was thinking of the bright side and I was like, no, I’m not going to do that. I was like no, you guys go and do it, if you guys want to get in trouble, do it. So that’s why I chose two colors and did my box like that. For Maria, the hope box served as a moral guide to helping her use her strength and voice to say no even when peer pressure existed.

Kristen talked about the benefits that the group expressive activities had on her feeling shy. Kristen noted that she learned to be more open, to work at getting to know people, and to take some risks. Rather than remaining quiet, Kristen learned that she could express herself and
that it was okay. This feeling translated to her experiences with communicating with people outside of group.

Kendra also addressed the importance of opening up to people outside of group when she experienced difficulties. She talked about using her voice to resolve conflicts, understand others perspectives, and to express how she was feeling rather than allowing it to build up inside of her.

As to asking how the group has changed her relationships outside of group, she talked about using the journal to express herself rather than holding a grudge. Additionally she took the advice gleaned from the group after the human knot activity and had a conversation with her family about what she was thinking. She reported, “I would say that some things have actually gotten better in my household.”

In response to the same question, Synthia talked about how she learned to use her voice to express more thoughts and feelings to her friends outside of group. She said, “Like I already talk to them mostly about it because there are some things that I would have kept away from them, but now I tell them.” It is possible that her experience in group helped her to feel like she could share more of herself safely with people. One important observation of Synthia during group was that she usually spoke exclusively to one or two of her friends and did not socialize much with other peers. However, during the group that used role playing to demonstrate conflict resolution in relationships, Synthia used her voice in a very strong way. When asked about this in the final interview, she was surprised to hear the interviewer’s positive feedback. She indicated that the subject matter was very personal and meaningful to her, and as a result, she felt compelled to talk in group. Her feedback was received positively by her peers. Although she did not make this direct connection, it is possible that this experience helped her to see that she could take risks and tell her friends more about herself.
Do the Girls Prefer One Expressive Strategy Over Others?

**Theme 1: Variety.** During the final interview, all of the girls indicated that they enjoyed multiple activities. The girls reiterated that the activities were fun. Although all of the girls reported liking many of the activities, there were a number of girls who could talk about what and why certain activities were their favorites. The facilitators used a variety of activities to appeal to a wide range of styles and preferences. While not all of the girls liked all of the activities, they all enjoyed several of them.

**Theme 2: The Creativity of Painting.** Three of the girls indicated that painting the hope box was their favorite activity because of the creativity involved and the opportunity to express their originality and their feelings through their art. April said that painting the hope box was her favorite activity because it was fun. Her interest and enjoyment in this activity was clear through observations of her during the group. Every week she focused intensely on her painting and worked meticulously so that she did not smudge the colors. She also voiced disapproval when the facilitators stopped the painting for the day to transition to another activity. These transitions seemed to disrupt her creative process. Additionally, April talked about the pride that she felt in looking at her completed project because she had worked so hard on completing it and felt that it turned out nicely.

Kendra also indicated that the hope box was her favorite activity because, “just making the hope box, you can make it your own way and put your own imagination into it, and like you get to design it any way you want. It expressed my mood and I think that’s the good thing about it.” Kendra enjoyed the creativity involved in this activity, but also explicitly named the therapeutic benefit of the activity. Although April did not directly name expressing feelings as a reason why she enjoyed it, observations of her made it seem that the experience of self-efficacy
was therapeutic for her. Her comments during the interview demonstrated that she had pride in
her work.

**Theme 3: Experiential: Teamwork, challenge, and symbolism.** Four of the girls identified
the human knot as their favorite activity. Their reasons for preferring this activity varied, but
seem to be linked to the experiential nature of it. When asked about why she enjoyed doing the
human knot, Mabelle said that she enjoyed the teamwork. Alexia also enjoyed the teamwork but
focused on enjoying it because of the challenge associated with untangling themselves. Maria
echoed this, stating that she liked the knot the most because everybody had to work together. Ina
understood the metaphor that the facilitators communicated about the knot as being symbolic of
difficult relationships. When asked what she liked about the activity, she talked about how
“doing that [the human knot] shows how hard it is. You could experience the knotty
relationship.” For Ina, the experiential component of this activity made the exercise more real.
This is important given the “knots” that she experienced in her relationship with her sister and
father, topics that she addressed during the interview and in her journals.

**Theme 4: The writing process and adult feedback.** Only two of the girls in the group
indicated that they enjoyed the writing component of the group. Although they did not indicate
this as a “favorite” activity, they talked about it as enjoyable separate from listing off multiple
activities. Both of these girls talked about the benefits of writing and also about enjoying the
feedback that they received from the facilitators. Each girl in the group was assigned an informal
mentor. Each week the girls would respond to a journal prompt and the following week their
mentor would respond to them. When April was asked to provide feedback on the journal
process, she said, “We got to write to you and you all wrote back.” She seemed to enjoy the
reciprocity of this process. When asked the same question, Kendra responded,
I did like it, because at the end of the POD you guys would ask some personal questions and some random questions to see what people are thinking about in their heads and what they are going through. Writing it in a journal can take it off their minds. It’s better to express it in a journal than hold it in and holding grudges in their mind.

She had also talked about the utility of using her mentor’s advice from the journal to help her handle a conflict with a peer. Kendra clearly used the journal as a way to process her emotions and to seek help from an adult.

**Theme 5: Nourishment.** Although multiple girls acknowledged liking the snacks, only Adrie identified the food as her favorite part of the group. In response to the question about naming her favorite activity, Adrie answered, “making the hamburgers. It was fun and good.” Adrie was referring to an activity where snack was combined with an expressive, experiential activity. Although there were snacks available at the start of each week, there were two weeks that the girls actually constructed mock hamburgers and mock sushi. Adrie’s recognition of the hamburgers as her favorite activity is significant for a number of reasons. First, Adrie tended toward hoarding the food. Rather than sharing with others, she would try to take as much as she could. Second, Adrie wrote about the importance of food and cooking in her life. In response to the journal prompt, tell about a gift (not a gift object) that somebody in your life has given to you. She wrote, “Something I learned from my grandmother is cooking. My grandmother can really cook. I’ve been cooking every since I was 10 years old. She taught me how to cook rice and beans. I can put together a lot of things if you want to learn how to cook, come to me!” Adrie seems to associate food with a positive relationship in her life. Despite her need to have so much food and her difficulty in sharing it with others, its availability seemed to have a positive impact on her experience in Strong Links.

Despite Adrie being the only individual to state that the food was her favorite part, it was clear from observing the girls how important the food was to them. The entire mood and
atmosphere of the group changed on the first day when one of the facilitators brought the snacks into the room. The group of girls transformed from being quiet and aloof to excited and energized. Some of the girls, including Adrie, began grabbing at the food and taking more than their fair share. It was unclear if they were very hungry or if the nourishment that the food provided was symbolic for a caring kind of emotional nourishment. It was also important to note that during an icebreaker in which they were asked to identify categories that were important to them, many of them chose food. The importance of food may also be related to cultural values surrounding food.

Do the Girls Report Any Negative Experiences in Strong Links?

Theme 1: Writing is “school like”: Boring and hard. Nearly half of the girls specifically addressed their dislike of the journaling at the conclusion of the group. Several of the girls explicitly compared it to school, stating that it reminded them too much of the writing assigned during class. Given that virtually every girl in the program commented on how pleasurable the expressive program was for them, this is a significant finding. In response to gathering feedback on the journaling, Mabelle commented, “Yeah, at the end, we always had to write, in class, too, that annoys me.” She made it very clear that she did not want her experience in Strong Links to mirror school in any way. According to Mabelle, she is a good student, so it does not seem that this is related to her disliking academics. Maria’s feedback on the journaling mirrored Mabelle’s views. Maria said, “We were like tired, we don't want to write, we just want to have fun, we've been writing the whole day in school.” Although Maria indicated that writing was not her favorite part, she appeared to be wary of offending the interviewer and noted that some of the topics were good and that some kids got into writing.
Kristen and Synthia did not make direct connections between school and writing; however, their responses may reflect some experiences that they have in school. Kristen wished that the journal prompts were easier so that she could think of something to say; whereas Synthia emphasized her dislike of writing in general. This may be particularly true for Kristen who noted in her pre-group interview that she struggled in school.

**Theme 2: Chaotic group climate.** Three of the girls in the group commented on the climate of the group as a negative factor. Ina and Synthia expressed some frustration over what they perceived to be a chaotic group environment. They felt that the facilitators needed to improve upon their ability to command attention of the girls. In response to a question about what the facilitators could have done better, Synthia responded, “Like I guess, like, speak up more, when you need [to], ‘Excuse me can I please have your attention’ and if they wouldn't listen to you then I guess you should try some other things.” Synthia’s response was important because on a number of occasions she helped to get her peers attention. While at the time her help was appreciated by the facilitators, this may have made her feel uncomfortable. Also, her advice was accurate because commanding attention was difficult for the facilitators.

**Theme 3: Student–facilitator disconnect.** When asked about what the facilitators could have done differently and if they felt connected to the facilitators, Kendra and Tina talked about wishing that the facilitators were more open about who they were. The girls felt that this would have facilitated a better connection. Kendra said, “Because I’m saying you guys could have been a little more open with us, but like struggles that we talked about, maybe you guys could have said, ‘Oh, we related to it’ and stuff like that.”

*Logic Model*
A visual representation of the emergent themes is presented in a logic model on the following page. The logic model serves as a representation of the meaning made between each theme.
Increased expression of thoughts and feelings

Distraction

Safety → Relationship Building

Nourishment

Nonverbal Expression

Music → Catharsis
Music → Relaxation
Music → Creativity

Painting

Painting → Relationship Building
Painting → Creativity

Drama

Drama → Perspective taking
Drama → Individuality

Clay

Clay → Skill building
Clay → Organizing
Clay → Catharsis
Clay → Relationship Building

Experiential

Writing

Writing → Skill building
Writing → Anger Management
Writing → Relaxation
Writing → Improved relationships

Relaxation

Creativity

Relationship Management

Catharsis

Self-Efficacy

Pride

Reminder

Increased self-esteem
Conclusion

The girls indicated that, overall, Strong Links was a positive, fun experience for them. Their experiences with the expressive activities encouraged self-growth, the development of coping skills, and were facilitative to using their voice in a positive way. The expressive activities allowed them an opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings nonverbally. Although their preferences for different activities varied, all of the girls enjoyed and benefited from some aspect of the program. A discussion of the thematic analysis as it is related to the literature and future direction of the field are discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

This chapter begins by reviewing the relevant research as it relates to the thematic analysis of this study. Based on the findings from this research, implications for future practice are also addressed. Finally, the weaknesses of this study are acknowledged and critically examined.

Evaluator Narrative

I am an educated white woman from an upper-middle class background. Being aware of my white privilege and the economic and educational opportunities that come with it were essential throughout this project. I recognized that I was different from the girls in Strong Links and that the privileges that I experienced throughout my youth and adulthood were not afforded to them. I entered this experience with a lens for social justice; a mission to work towards a society where all people would be afforded equal opportunities regardless of the color of their skin and the amount of money in their pockets. Critically thinking about how my background and biases impacted my perceptions of the girls and Strong Links is examined below.

There were a number of surprises that I experienced throughout this project. I entered the program with a sense that “loss of voice” in adolescents would look different for urban minority girls than it did for upper-middle class Caucasian girls. I found that there was an even greater contrast between these two populations than I had expected. Strong Links participants made their opinions known and were unafraid to express individuality. However, they expressed the pain associated with adolescence and their life circumstances in different ways. Having worked in this school before, I was familiar with “girl fighting” however had not spent nearly enough time thinking about the root of this behavior.
The girls in Strong Links struggled with expressing different kinds of emotions in a way that worked for them. It is embarrassing to admit that I was surprised by how many of the girls talked about anger. Retrospectively, this makes sense. They had a right to be angry; to express anger. Their schools were under funded and under resourced. Their communities were not always safe and ultimately most of the power remains with the white man. They were not afraid to express anger, as is often true for white, upper middle class girls. I allowed stereotypes and my own upbringing to influence my thoughts around anger, thinking of boys as being angry and aggressive. Despite my previous knowledge of “girl fighting”, I continued to think of girls as being more strongly associated with internalizing their feelings. The girls in Strong Links showed me that although they sometimes internalized, they often exploded in anger.

The art projects: The joy that this brought the girls was another surprise. The response from the girls was overwhelming. Their excitement and energy was contagious. I have worked with many youth and have always used artistic expression as a means to connect, yet I did not realize how important these projects could be. Perhaps their extremely enthusiastic response to the projects was because the girls in Strong Links were unaccustomed to having these kinds of materials at their disposal, given the lack of available resources at their school? Perhaps it was that they were not ashamed to express joy in front of their peers whereas youth from other communities would be. Whatever the reason, it was clear that these young women enjoyed and benefited from these projects.

In addition to the surprises, there were also challenges. One challenge was finding a way to initially connect with the girls. The first day of group felt uncomfortable which came as a surprise to me. Looking back, this makes sense given that we were strangers and of a different racial background. However, I entered the group thinking that my strength was building rapport
with young people. While this may be a part of who I am as a therapist in training, I failed to account for my outsider status. We quickly found that introducing the art activities was a rapport building strategy.

Associated with the first day discomfort was the challenge in being authoritative. I had to strain to call attention to myself and often felt like my voice was not being heard. I learned from the girls during the interviews that this was a problem for them as well. They wanted a female leader who could command attention – an area that I struggled with throughout the program. Retrospectively, I think that I should have developed a system for quieting the group to explain projects.

Overall, developing, implementing and evaluating Strong Links was a meaningful educational experience. I have learned so much from the participants and will carry that knowledge with me in all future endeavors.

Adolescent Girls Development

The girls in Strong Links had a great deal to share about their experiences as adolescent girls. They provided stories of the support that they received from families and the challenges that they experienced at home. Many of the girls pointed to strong bonds between themselves and other members of their family. Some girls talked about the pressures of caretaking for younger siblings, others about the strict rules that their parents imposed on them. A common theme among the girls was that boys added stress and pressure to their lives. However, relationships with their female peers was also an added stress due to the “drama” that seemed to be inevitable in middle school social circles. It seems that the lives of this group of adolescent girls were significantly impacted by their many relationships. The girls talked about their families shaping their perspectives and their actions. This finding supports research from Stewart
(2004) who suggests that Latinas, the most strongly represented ethnicity in Strong Links; remain connected to their families throughout adolescence. It also calls into question the traditional notion of individuation that is argued to be a “natural” progression in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Although some girls clearly talked about differences in opinion and the need to spend more time with their friends, many addressed the importance of being with their families. This may be related at least in part to their culture, but may also be connected to the girls’ belief that their families are there for them no matter what. Additionally, given that many girls did not always feel safe in their neighborhoods, their families and their homes may also have been particularly important because they may have provided a safe haven.

This finding also supports Pipher’s (1994) argument that adolescence is the “social and personal experience” of the biological process of puberty. The biology of puberty and the hormones that the girls experience are certainly a critical part of this developmental period. At the same time, Pipher (1994) points to the importance of considering the social experience of this age group. The girls were clearly focused on their social experiences in home and at school during Strong Links group. Pipher (2004) and Nakkula & Toshalis (2006) also point to adolescence as a critical time marked by a series of choices that affect one’s ability to develop her true self. This research, however, is focused on Caucasian, middle- and upper-middle class girls. Participants from this group, who represent minority, low-income populations, speak to this idea but within a different context. Maria’s discussion of the black and yellow colors on her box as representing her good and bad choices/self was the most poignant example of this. Maria indicated that there were numerous occasions when she felt influenced by peers to make poor decisions. She recounted a time when she jumped out of a moving bus to impress her peers even though she knew that it was dangerous.
Maria also talked about her experiences with emotions and feelings throughout adolescence. She indicated that for her, it was difficult to talk openly about her feelings and as a result, she usually kept things to herself when she felt upset. For Maria, her decisions to engage in risky behaviors and to hold her feelings in were experiences likely to impact the development of a true self. During interviews, it became clear that she was struggling to make sense of who she wanted to be. Like Maria, April also indicated that she was unable to find a way to express herself when upset. Maria and April’s examples support the literature that states that adolescent girls lose their voice, self-esteem, and sense of self during this developmental period. Rather than expressing oppositional views, they feel it more important to be courteous and nice. In fear of expressing feelings that may be too strong, volatile, sad, angry, sexual, or loud, adolescent girls often swallow those feelings as opposed to saying how they feel (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Orenstein, 1994). During her interview, Maria stressed all of the positive experiences that she had in Strong Links and when she did express a change that she wished the facilitators had made, she apologized for suggesting it. Despite being reassured that both positive and negative feedback was desired, it seemed that she wanted to please the facilitator. She was a clear example of a young woman who was struggling to maintain her voice.

Maria and April’s experiences can also be understood by thinking about gender role socialization. In the United States and to some extent also within the Latina culture, expectations for girls often revolve around being quiet, compliant, and nice. Even the other girls who said that they expressed anger indicated that they often tried to hold it in and then later exploded. They were likely responding to gender role expectations to be kind, sweet and compliant, but were unable to manage that forever. On the one hand, many of the girls were fine expressing oppositional views and on the other, they made an attempt to suppress anger.
Additionally, Maria’s decisions to engage in risky behaviors need to be considered in the context of her school and community. In her school and her neighborhood, receiving an education is not always considered “cool.” Maria explained that you received status when you engaged in risky behavior instead of studying. While this may be true of many middle school environments, the pressures seem even greater in this community. In her life, young people are constantly being challenged by poverty, poor education, and community violence and engaging in risky behaviors may be understood as an angry reaction to these societal stressors. It can also be considered a survival strategy in a very stressful environment. Many youth deal with these challenges by acting out, others by internalizing. Maria appears to be engaging in both, one which is more consistent with gender role expectations and the other which appears to be more consistent with community pressures to fit in with her peers.

Although several of the girls in the program talked about peer pressure, conformity and concealing their true feelings, most of the girls talked about wanting to manage their extreme emotions and reactivity when in conflict. They talked about both verbal and physical fighting as ways that they had previously managed conflict in relationships. Their reactions could be a reflection of having difficulty with verbal expression, which Brunik (1999) suggests could result in the use of physical and verbal aggression to deal with their feelings. Regardless, rather than going underground, as much of the research on adolescent girls development suggests, these girls were standing up tall with their fists held high and their voices loud and clear. Some research has suggested that anger is one reaction that adolescent girls from a variety of backgrounds have in reaction to learning about gender stereotyping (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Pipher, 1994; Way, 1995). It is possible that some of the girls were expressing anger in reaction to a realization that girls were not supposed to behave in certain ways.
Robinson and Ward (1991) would suggest that the girls in Strong Links were displaying resistance for survival. They needed to cope with life stressors, demands, stereotypes, and social expectations, and looked to short-term solutions to these concerns. Robinson and Ward suggest that the girls need to develop resistance for liberation, where they would utilize strategies for resisting negative depictions of self and short-term, harmful solutions to their problems.

Although this research focused on African American youth, it seems applicable to many of the girls in this program. The participants in Strong Links were primarily from disenfranchised groups (African American, Latina, female, low-income). As a result, they were likely to have internalized negative concepts of themselves based on what popular media and American societal norms have transmitted to them through both explicit and implicit messages. For instance, popular movies often portray minority individuals as criminals. Implicit messages are conveyed in the way of providing a lack of quality education to low-income youth when compared with their higher-income peers. This communicates that society does not value low-income young people as much as they value higher income youth. Learning to resist these messages through healthy means, such as studying in school, is a way to engage in resistance for liberation. Strong Links worked hard at helping the girls to develop resistance for liberation in a number of ways, including providing the space to critique and talk about sex role messages.

At least one way that this realization may have been evidenced was through their discussion about sex. During group, some girls expressed anger over the double standard for girls and boys around sex. The girls desire and need to talk about sex and the double standard supports literature that suggests that Latinas struggle with this as they are trying to understand their bodies, sexuality, and desire to fit into society (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006). Despite this, it is also important to recognize that there are individual experiences within different racial and
Listening to their Voices

ethnic groups and that literature that talks about “all Latina girls” as having certain experiences is far too limiting. While many of the Strong Links girls expressed a need to talk about the double standard around sex, several other girls expressed discomfort surrounding this topic.

The discussion of sex also needs to include a discussion around power. There is a clear power differential associated with sex that exists between males and females. For men, increased social power and status is often associated with having more sexual partners. As the girls in Strong Links said, boys are considered “cool” when they have many partners. However, a decrease in social status and power occurs for females if they have a high number of sexual partners. Girls are considered sluts and are looked down on by their peers if they have too many partners. The girls were acutely aware of this power differential and the limitations that their gender placed upon their development of sexuality and choice around sexual practices.

At the same time, it was clear from group discussions that a number of girls had experimented with sex; however, many seemed afraid to openly talk about it. For instance, Maria asked if a girl was a “ho” if she had multiple partners. Several of the other girls talked secretively and provocatively about boys coming to their homes, but to the group said, “We are pure.” These discussions support literature suggesting that many Latina adolescents are careful not to admit to having had sex for fear of being called a slut (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Posner, 2006). These fears seem founded in reality, because although a number of girls pointed to the double standard, many also endorsed the belief that girls who had multiple partners were sluts. These conversations have major implications for future programming, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In addition to expressing anger over double standards with sexuality and gender, the girls in Strong Links talked about feeling angry about girls gossiping and challenging family
dynamics. Whatever the reason for their anger, it was extraordinary that they were able to express it at all. Mainstream American culture has socialized people, particularly women and girls, to be nice, sweet, and happy. Expression of anger is often characterized as negative rather than touted as healthy. What was impressive about these girls was that they were aware of their anger and their need to express it. Their anger was a healthy reaction to oppression, gender role expectations, and the struggles that they experienced in their day-to-day lives. They wanted to maintain their voice and dissenting opinions, but wanted to do so in a way that was helpful rather than hurtful to them. For instance, the girls talked about wanting to learn how to express their anger in nonphysical ways so that they would not get into trouble at school or get hurt during arguments. Some research has suggested that African American girls are socialized to stand up for themselves and to express anger; however, this is in direct contrast to American standards for femininity (Sanders & Bradley, 2005). For the most part, the girls in this group were already able to resist the American standards for femininity. However, they looked to the expressive activities and conversations in Strong Links to help them with resistance for liberation versus resistance for survival (Robinson & Ward, 1991). They wanted to think about ways in which they could express their anger and work towards resisting negative forces in ways that would be productive for them in the long-term. The expressive activities in Strong Links helped them to be self-reflective and to make sense of their internal world. The projects also helped them to be able to express their thoughts and feelings and to understand the impact that their multiple contexts had on their feelings and behaviors.

Expressive Activities as Growth-Producing and Therapeutic

The participants in Strong Links identified the expressive activities and processes as being beneficial for a number of different reasons. First, many of the participants identified the
expressive activities as being helpful in acquiring new skills. As previously mentioned, anger was an emotion that they dealt with on a day-to-day basis. They needed to be able to express their anger about their life circumstances without being self-destructive. The girls stressed that the creation of the clay runes was a means of calming themselves and gaining control over their feelings. Their responses support the literature that suggests that expressive therapy is an active healing process that engages the individuals’ senses; emphasizes self-expression, imagination, and a mind-body connection (Malchiodi, 2005; McNiff, 2004). The girls chose colored clay, created a shape, and then chose symbols that represented strengths and weaknesses for them. They internalized the mind-body connection that the runes provided for them, indicating that touching the clay actually produced a calming effect for them. Their creation and reaction to the making of the runes also supports the literature that states that art making has the potential to calm and to help people to “gain symbolic control over terrifying circumstances and to establish and inner sense of security” (Malchiodi, 1998, p.138; Malchiodi, 2005). In talking about the runes, Ina said, “Yeah, cause like the runes, I’m always going to remember them, if I’m scared I can get it and remember [to calm myself down].”

Although the majority of the girls did not cite writing as being a critical therapeutic component of Strong Links, the girls who did benefit enjoyed the chance to think and write about their lives. A couple of the girls’ interviews supported research that suggests that writing is a less threatening way for young people to communicate their difficulties (Flint, 2004). Freely’s (2004) research suggests that writing allows individuals to reshape their stories and to rework their emotions. Although the girls talked about the reparative work of writing, they also introduced the benefits of receiving feedback from a mentor, an area that was not addressed in the researched materials on writing. This is an important component of the program because it facilitated
written expression but also facilitated feedback from a mentor in a non face-to-face verbal encounter. This is also illustrative of the benefit of providing multiple ways for adolescents to communicate with adult supports. American society is so focused on verbal (oral or spoken) interactions that providing young people with alternative forms of expression is not as commonplace as it should be. Even therapy primarily focuses on verbal interactions with an adult. Despite the presence of expressive therapies, sadly, it remains a less utilized and often less respected modality of therapy.

Expressive approaches can be a useful way to promote internal assets. Research indicates that using arts with adolescents may serve as a way to boost their self-esteem (Mckelvey, 2003; Trammel, 2003). Analysis from the interviews with the girls in Strong Links supports this finding. Adrie is the most poignant example of this. She talked about how the group helped her to change the way she felt, stating, “Like I am better than most people think I am.” Although Adrie was only one of a number of the girls who talked about their self-esteem as a result of the art, pride was a recurrent theme for the girls. Several of the girls talked about feeling proud of their work, of surprising themselves with how well their work turned out, and their sense of accomplishment regarding their ability to express their individuality through the art. The self-efficacy that resulted is a valuable benefit reported from the girls and one that was not often addressed in the literature reviewed for this paper. Feeling a sense of accomplishment can also contribute to bolstering one’s self-esteem.

In addition to the self-efficacy and increased self-esteem, many of the girls talked about the importance of having the space to express themselves through their art. They felt that their art was a symbolic expression of their internal worlds. Maria’s hope box, which she described as the good and bad parts of herself, was a striking example of the cathartic benefit of art. While she
was never able or willing to verbally express her exact internal conflict, her box was a symbolic representation of her struggle. This example supports the literature that states that using the arts with adolescents can be a useful way to help them to externalize their feelings, to promote internal growth and healing (Bryce, 1995). The girls in Strong Links were not privileged in terms of their social, economic, racial, gender, and educational status. The expressive art projects provided them with an opportunity to be self-reflective and to express their confusion and emotions about their life circumstances. In addition, a number of the girls referred to their art (the runes, the hope box, the bracelet) as reminders of what they had learned in group, further supporting the literature that art can act as a symbolic reminder of their growth and learning (Malchiodi, 2003, 2005). This can be especially useful for teens that often benefit from tangible and visual reminders of their learning, something that cannot be gained solely from verbal interactions.

The Arts Impact on Relationships

The girls in Strong Links talked about the impact that the expressive activities had on their relationships both inside and outside of the group. According to research, using the arts in a group setting can be particularly helpful for adolescent females as themes of identity and belonging are important to this age group. Relying on the arts as a form of communication can help girls address sensitive issues with nonverbal communication. Girls can also be encouraged to take risks when they are engaged in art and are in a trusting relationship (Schoenberg, Winter 2001). Results from the interviews with the Strong Links members support this research. The girls indicated that the expressive activities helped facilitate more trusting relationships with their peers in Strong Links. Tina stated, “Yeah, I felt happy to do the project [hope box] and happy because there are people who I trust now in the group that I didn’t know before.” This finding is
particularly important given the increasingly solitary and technological nature of today’s society. Youth are spending more time playing video games, interacting with peers through online chat sites like Facebook, watching television, surfing the Internet, text messaging and talking on the phone. These experiences are not necessarily bad, but the potential impact of technology savvyness on relationship building is worth considering. Given this climate, it is likely to be more important than ever before to have groups of youth come together to work on artistic expression, to facilitate connection.

Several of the girls also spoke to the value of the human knot activity, indicating that this facilitated an environment that allowed people to work together towards a common goal. This helped the girls to feel connected to one another. The girls also talked about feeling more comfortable talking about tough issues because they had the expressive activities to distract them. Although talking about “tough” subjects has likely always been a challenge for teens, it is possible that, again, the inclusion of technology in youth’s lives has made it even more difficult to have hard conversations in person. When young people can text message, email, or instant message bad news to friends, it removes a layer of personal connection and makes delivering hard messages much easier. This argues for the importance of including expressive activities in the lives of youth so that they can direct their energy toward creative expression but also talk with their peers about uncomfortable topics.

Several of the girls talked about the direct benefit that the art had on their relationships outside of group. Kendra noted that she had learned how to take other people’s perspectives in relationships as a result of her experience in the human knot activity and the role plays. Maria also talked about the benefit of being in a group of peers who could provide her with advice around dating. She indicated that her perspective on dating changed as a result of the expressive
activities completed with her peer group and with the support of adult mentors. Both Maria and Kendra’s statements support research that healthy girls’ development occurs while they are in growth-fostering relationships (Hartling, 1996; Sillitti, 2004). Maria and Kendra both benefited from being in a group of female peers and adult mentors who provided support, feedback, and encouragement to one another. Their experiences point to the need for all girls programming with an arts-based curriculum.

Although Brown and Gilligan (1992) assert that being in relationships has the potential to lead girls to sacrifice some of their authenticity to maintain the relationships, this did not seem as true for most of these girls. Some of the girls appeared to conform to one another’s opinions on occasion, but most of the time they expressed dissenting views and seemed comfortable engaging in challenging dialogues. This process was helped by the presence of expressive activities that served as a distraction while in conversation. Maria was an example of somebody who had the potential to sacrifice some of her authenticity as a result of being in relationships; however, as previously addressed, it seemed that she was working on making sense of who she was. As stated earlier, many of the girls talked about their desire to learn how to express their dissenting views in a more prosocial way while remaining in a healthy relationship. Contrary to Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) research, most of the girls in this program had no intention of sacrificing who they were for anybody. Rather than going underground and losing their individual identity, the girls in Strong Links thrived on expression of individuality through the arts. They thought carefully about what they wanted to say through their art and did so with intention and gusto.

Implications for Practice
The experiences the girls in Strong Links reported provide useful information for future practitioners, researchers and theorists working with or studying urban, middle school minority girls. The information from the Strong Links girls is just one source of information that can supplement knowledge gained from existing literature and research studies. The knowledge gained from these girls is especially useful for implementing the Strong Links curriculum or groups similar in nature to Strong Links in the future.

The broadest implication of this study was the benefit of using a positive youth development (PYD) framework. Much of the research on urban minority youth takes a deficit approach, thereby portraying girls as having problem-saturated lives. Theory serves as a lens for viewing and understanding populations. When using a deficit approach, one sees just that, deficits. In taking that stance, the literature ignores the strengths and assets that urban minority youth possess. Many urban minority youth face significant challenges, but their resilience is striking. The positive youth development approach does not ignore youth challenges; instead it focuses energy on strengths. In taking this approach, the facilitators of this study worked towards building -on the assets already present among the teens rather than trying to eliminate their deficits.

The girls in Strong Links showed the facilitators that they were strong, creative, supportive, energetic, and caring young women. They cared for each other in group, offering support and advice. They came to group with energy and enthusiasm each day and concentrated on using their creativity during the expressive activities. They showed the facilitators that despite poverty, community violence, or other difficult circumstances, they had strong goals for their futures such as becoming a pediatrician or a fashion designer. They worked hard at expressing their emotions even when they were scared to do so. They were also introspective and asked for help in
managing difficult experiences. Had the facilitators approached this group with a deficit lens, they would have seen hardship and lack of opportunity. However, approaching it from a PYD perspective allowed the facilitators to encourage the already present assets within the girls. Research on PYD programming suggests that the most successful programs promote both external and internal assets (Scales & Leffert, 2004). This approach leads to positive youth behavior. During Strong Links, the facilitators framed the girls’ anger and their ability to express it as beneficial. Rather than looking at this as a problem that needed to be solved, it was approached as an asset to nurture. While the girls wanted help learning how to manage anger, their ability to express it at all in a society that discourages expression of emotion was incredible. Working with the girls to find a comfortable way for them to express their anger was a way in which PYD was employed. The girls were encouraged to think about how they could translate what they learned during Strong Links to their lives outside of group. Future practitioners should consider using the PYD lens to help them encourage young people to reach their own potential.

The use of PYD has some policy implications. The feminist ecological model and the importance of social justice meet here. Layer 2 of the feminist ecological model addresses social policy, government, and other formal organizations. One component of this layer that needs to be addressed is American government and society’s drive to use intervention versus prevention programs (Ballou, et al., 2002). Rather than working with youth before there are serious problems, money is put into interventions for dealing with an identified problem. American policy makers could shift the focus and put additional funding into prevention programs, extracurricular activities, and social emotional development in schools that work from a PYD framework. This shift could encourage and empower youth to bolster their strengths rather than eliminate their problems. Research supports that positive youth development encourages positive
behavior (Scales & Leffert, 2004). News media often talks about the crime in urban areas committed by youth. If society shifted attention to encouraging positive behavior in youth throughout their entire early development, the need for detention centers and remediation programs for youth would likely decrease.

Another consideration within layer 2 of the feminist ecological model is the availability of youth programming for all young people, particularly urban minority youth (Ballou, et al., 2002). The girls in Strong Links sought out and needed a safe haven from school where they could develop their strengths. Nearly all of the girls talked about school, some as a source of pride and many others as a source of stress. They looked to Strong Links as a place to just “be kids,” to be creative and to have fun. Any experience within Strong Links that mimicked school was perceived as a negative component of the program. The girls used Strong Links as a place to voice concerns and thoughts that they did not feel comfortable expressing in other environments. This finding supports literature that states that many youth report that school is not a safe space to address their concerns (E. J. Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Torre, 2005). Youth are looking for a place to talk about pressing concerns, and youth programming is an ideal place for them to access support. In a political climate where budget cuts are commonplace and educational programs, particularly in inner city schools, are being eliminated, it is so important to recognize the need for extracurricular activity for positive youth development (McKelvey, 2003). Layer 3 within the feminist ecological model also points to the distribution of resources as having an impact on people (Ballou, et al., 2002). Although all schools have had cuts, certainly inner city schools and communities have felt the brunt of economic troubles and budget cuts. Youth programming needs to be preserved to help youth progress successfully through adolescence. This is a social justice issue that needs attention from policy makers but that also needs to be
advocated for by practitioners and scholars who work with youth. Young people need to have access to supportive adults and creative outlets to express their feelings.

Layer 2 within the feminist ecological model also points to the impact that academic institutions have on people (Ballou, et al., 2002). Dimitriadis (2005) addresses the detrimental impact that the high stakes testing movement has had on education and youth. Families from upper socioeconomic brackets can purchase more student-centered and creative education for their children; most families from lower socioeconomic brackets cannot. The girls’ responses during the interviews and their enthusiasm about their ability to “choose” express their “individuality” and to be creative support the literature that advocates for more creative outlets for youth. Both out-of-school time and extracurricular programs in school should incorporate creative, artistic, student-centered activities to meet this need for students. Gardner’s multiple intelligences suggest that intelligence is more than one’s analytical ability, and this further underscores the need to incorporate expressive (art, drama, music, etc.) modalities into programming for youth (Jackson, 2003; K. F. McCarthy, et al., 2004). A variety of expressive mediums (unless they are pre-designated as a music group, yoga group, etc.) provides the girls with a range of ways to express themselves. The interviews with the girls revealed that the favorite activities varied across participants, illustrating the benefit of incorporating different expressive media. In fact, several spoke of their desire to increase the amount of art/expressive activities and to decrease the talk. This again points to the idea that sometimes nonverbal expression is less threatening and more accessible to teens. The absence of creative expression for youth both inside and outside of school is unacceptable.

Further, research indicates that youth who engage in creative activities during out-of-school time programs have a stronger sense of self and a greater self-esteem (Trammel, 2003). Although
Strong Links was not technically an out-of-school time program, it had similar features. This program occurred during a Period of Discovery time that was designated once every week in school during the last period of the day. It was a time for the youth to explore extracurricular activities with adults who were not necessarily their teachers. Eliminating creative youth programming has the potential to impact negatively young people’s sense of self. An absence of expressive activities in schools in addition to cuts to extracurricular programs would rob young people of a chance to explore their teen experience in creative ways.

Another important implication for this type of programming is to focus heavily on creating a structured, calm, and fun environment. A number of the girls in Strong Links suggested that the facilitators had not provided enough structure. For instance, several of the girls indicated that the facilitators struggled with getting the girls’ attention. They found this frustrating and felt compelled to help. Given that many of these girls have chaotic day-to-day lives marked by community violence, absentee parents, and socioeconomic stressors, it is critical to establish a strong voice as facilitators. This would guide the group with firm limits while at the same time not ruling the group with an authoritarian style. The girls’ observations were correct as the facilitators often had a difficult time managing behavioral issues such as not listening to instructions. Possibly the group leaders were so concentrated on establishing rapport that they lost sight of setting firm boundaries with the girls. Regardless, this is clearly something that future group leaders need to be mindful of when facilitating a group.

Future facilitators may also want to consider their level of self-disclosure. Given that this was not a therapy group, but a supportive group for girls, it would have been appropriate to use more self-disclosure to build the relationships with the girls. A number of the girls expressed dissatisfaction with the facilitators for not sharing enough of who they were. The three
facilitators were all therapists in training, which likely affected their approach in group. Research indicates successful programs include caring relationships between adults and participants (Trammel, 2003). The girls indicated that they felt supported and cared for by the facilitators, but said they had hoped to develop closer, more intimate relationships with the facilitators. This finding supports Trammel’s research that points to the importance of a strong relationship between the adults and participants.

Trammel (2003) talks about the importance of a high adult-to-student ratio as indication of a successful program. The girls did not directly address this as a positive aspect of the program, but many talked about appreciating having a specific mentor. With that said, there were eleven girls and three adults, resulting in a high staff-to-student ratio. Although the girls may not have directly commented on this, having three adults to help the girls with the expressive projects and to guide those who had more difficulty was critical. This was especially helpful for the girls who were more withdrawn at first and seemed to need more encouragement from the facilitators. This was also critical for the girls who were testing the limits in the beginning of the program. While one facilitator worked with girls who were having a more difficult time focusing, the other facilitators could lead the activity. Future programs should strive to maintain a high staff-to-student ratio.

Another implication of this study was the importance of having a space that was designated for only girls. Several of the girls talked about the significance of sharing this time only with girls. They said that the all-girls environment allowed them to talk about issues and concerns that they would not have addressed if boys were in the room. This finding supports the literature that states that there is a major need for all-girls programming. Research indicates that girls are best served by all-girls programs that focus on gender and also pay attention to race,
culture, and other social aspects of their lives (Way, 1995; Wheeler, et al., 2005). Strong Links focused on gender specific concerns and other social issues for the girls. Although there were some brief conversations about race and culture, and many of them included cultural symbols on their hope boxes, this did not seem to be a central theme. At one time an activity specific to culture was going to be included, but time constraints limited many of the activities that the facilitators hoped to incorporate. With that said the facilitators could have introduced the topic of race or culture each week to determine if this was a pertinent topic for the girls. This is something for future practitioners to consider as they implement similar programs.

An area of inquiry that was not addressed in the literature and was an unexpected discovery from this research project was the significance of food to the participants. Only one girl commented on the food as being her favorite part of the program, but many of the girls talked about enjoying eating with their peers. More striking than their comments about the food was the observation of their reaction to it. The girls were overjoyed by the presentation of food and each week excitedly met the facilitators with questions about the food for the week. The presentation of food resulted in conversations related to cultural foods that they and their caretakers prepared. During the initial icebreakers, nearly all of the girls talked about the importance of food in their lives. The food seemed to serve as a symbol for both physical and emotional nourishment. Providing food broke down the barriers of silence and discomfort between the peers and between the youth and the facilitators, making it an important component to include in programming. Providing food could also serve as a conversational opener around culture. Another consideration for future facilitators would be to incorporate culture specific food into the program.

One of the most important implications of this research project is the value that the
participatory action evaluation/youth participatory evaluation provided. As addressed in Chapter 4, this program has evolved over time. The pilot project allowed the researchers to adapt the program based on the needs and desires of the girls in this school. Research indicates that effective girls’ programming begins with a needs assessment of the girls, their families, and their communities (Wheeler, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, the families of the girls were not consulted due to time limitations; however, the girls and the RALLY community were consulted to develop the program. This was essential in creating an effective and appropriate curriculum—the facilitators changed activities that did not go well the first time and adapted activities to fit more closely the needs of the participants. Facilitator flexibility, a key component of this approach, was critical during the program. Instead of forcing the girls to go in one direction, they allowed the girls to influence the direction of the group. The most striking example of this was when Maria asked to talk about sex versus stress in group. Again, such flexibility is supported by literature that states that the decision making throughout the group needs to be shared with participants (Wheeler, et al., 2005). Additionally, the girls talked about appreciating the facilitators for allowing them to talk about “hard stuff” and for being open to the direction that the girls took the conversation. Future practitioners should work towards asking their constituents about their hopes for the program, rather than implementing a program without consulting them. Future practitioners should also strive to incorporate families more than this program did. Given the girls’ comments about the importance of family in their lives, it seems important to work toward including parents or guardians in conversations about the evolution of programs involving their children.

As a result of the PAR/YPE approach, it became clear during the group that sexual education was an important element of learning that was not occurring for these girls. Many
seemed eager to grapple with the conversations about sex and stereotypes and indicated that they had no other arena for this. Providing a safe space for girls to address stereotypes surrounding sex, questions about sexuality, safe sex, and choices with regards to engaging in sexual activity, is essential. Rather than forcing ideas on them or continuing to reinforce negative stereotypes about girls who engage in sex, it would be beneficial to work with them around understanding their bodies, their desires, their sexuality, and developing their personal philosophy around intimacy.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this research project need to be addressed. First and foremost, the number of sessions of Strong Links was cut from twelve to six weeks. The limited amount of time with the girls had a strong potential for negatively impacting the outcome of this group. Nevertheless, the girls indicated that they did experience growth and change as a result of their participation in the expressive activities. It can be hypothesized, therefore, that there would have been an even greater impact reported had the time been longer. No follow up took place after the initial program ended, so it is unclear if the changes that they reported were lasting. Additionally, due to the limited time, the social action piece of this program and some of the activities specifically related to culture were eliminated. This was a major loss to the program. The facilitators did attempt to introduce the social action idea during one group session, but it was clear that there would not be enough time to work on it effectively. In actuality, an entire six week group could have been focused on doing a change project.

The actual carryout of the group turned out quite well; however, one potential weakness was that one of the group leaders arrived late each week due to conflicts in her schedule. As a result, the group flow was disrupted each time she arrived. This had the potential to impact
negatively the girls who identified her as a mentor. Each week the girls would ask where she was and a conversation about her lateness would ensue. Although it does not seem to have had a detrimental impact on the group functioning, this could relate in part to some of girls who indicated that they felt disconnected from their mentor.

One important consideration on the impact of the group was the differing ethnicities of the facilitators with those of the girls. Research documents the potential difficulty in mentoring across race and ethnicity (Wheeler, et al., 2005). This difference in ethnicity may also have contributed to some of the girls’ feelings of disconnection from their mentor.

In addition to the implementation of the program, there were some weaknesses in actual collection of the data. One glitch was that one of the participants was absent during the last week of school and as a result her final interview was not collected. The absence of one voice is a significant omission given that the study only consisted of eleven girls. Additionally, all of the first interviews were typed instead of recorded due to IRB approval being held up. Also, one of the participants refused to be recorded for her final interview so her final interview was typed. Typing an interview could result in missing some information and losing the exact phrasing of the participant. Given the importance of staying true to the girls’ voices, this is a potential weakness of this study.

The analysis of the interviews presents another potential weakness of the study. Although there was a careful, thoughtful analysis of data, ideally, the thematic analysis would have been presented to the participants for review. This approach would have been true to the participatory evaluation approach because it would have helped the researchers understand whether their meaning making of the girls’ experience was correct. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to time limitations. The program ended during the final week of school and there was not time to
analyze the interviews prior to the girls leaving for summer vacation. The thematic analysis was checked for faithfulness by a fellow researcher. This was useful: Because of the shared experience in the group, perspectives might be too similar to see many differences. With that said, because each researcher came into this project with a different focus, the process of checking one another’s themes worked well. Differences in opinions helped check the faithfulness of the developed themes.

Another limitation of this group is attributed to the PAR/YPE approach. Although this approach is solid in many ways and provides the opportunity to work reflexively and collaboratively with participants, it does have the potential to impact the results received through interviews. It is important that the potential for the girls wanting to please the facilitators is not ignored. A relationship with the girls was established and because of this, they could feel more able, inclined, and comfortable to present their true beliefs about the program, or quite the opposite. It is possible that the girls would not want to upset the facilitators/mentors and would focus only on the positives associated with the program. Although this seems true for at least Maria, most of the other girls spoke of the drawbacks of the program. Regardless, some of the information that the girls provided during interviews could have been influenced by wanting to please the program facilitators.

Finally, another potential weakness of this research project was the verbal interview process: Strong Links was based on using expressive means to access the girls’ voices. Some girls were clearly less verbal during interviews than others. This could signify their discomfort with verbal communication, particularly with Caucasian adult women. At the same time, images of their art work were included in the conversation to help facilitate communication. This helped some of the girls because they could divert their gaze from the interviewer to the image of their
art work. Including some form of artistic expression in the interview may also have been an effective way to gather information from them in a nonverbal way. This has also has important implications for future researchers, who should consider using alternatives to verbal interviews to gather information from teens.

**Conclusion**

Strong Links was a group that used expressive activities within a positive youth development framework to encourage young women to communicate their thoughts and feelings. This group and the ensuing participatory youth evaluation process demonstrated the importance of including the arts (drama, music, writing, art, etc.) in programming for the girls in Strong Links. From the voices of the Strong Links participants who were disenfranchised members of American society, it became evident that expressive activities allowed them to access thoughts and feelings that they may not have been able to explore through speech or talking alone. The evaluation showed that expressive activities had benefits for both aggressive youth and for those who internalized their feelings. Based on the experiences from the girls in Strong Links, it seems that eliminating art programming from school may seriously impact young people’s social and emotional development. When decisions are made about out-of-school time programming, inclusion of arts activities is quintessential. The girls in Strong Links made it clear that the expressive activities were beneficial for them in many ways. Young people have the right to explore artistic expression and it is important that American society begin to offer young people more of these types of opportunities. Providing them with these opportunities would promote positive youth development, development of healthy self-esteem, with tools and avenues to resist negative stereotypes and discrimination and ultimately to develop their resiliency in the face of challenging life circumstances.
### Appendix A

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**Northeastern**

**Notification of IRB Action**

**Date:** April 15, 2009  
**IRB #:** 09-04-04

**Principal Investigator(s):** Mary Balou  
Christina Tortolani, Amanda Allen, Lindsay Amper

**Department:** Counseling and Educational Psychology

**Address:**  
214 Lake Hall  
Northeastern University

**Title of Project:** STRONG LINKS: A Combined Program Evaluation on Resiliency, Relational Health and the use of the Arts in Girls Programming

**Participating Sites:** Curley Middle School, Jamaica Plain, MA – letter received

**Informed Consent:** One (1) parental consent to be signed only in instances of choosing to have their daughter “opt-out”  
One (1) assent to be read and discussed with students and initiated by researcher

**DHHS Review Category:** Expedited #7

**Monitoring Interval:** 12 months

**Approval Expiration Date:** April 14, 2010

**Investigator’s Responsibilities:**

1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

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C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair  
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina  
Director, Research Integrity

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Northeastern University Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Department of Counseling and Applied Educational Psychology
Name of Principal Investigator: Mary Ballou, Ph.D.
Name of Student Researchers: Christina Tortolani, M.A., Amanda Allen, MS.Ed, Lindsay Amper, M.Ed.


We are inviting your daughter to take part in a research study because she is either a 7th or 8th grade student and is participating in the RALLY program. The Strong Links program is taking place at the Curley K-8 School in Jamaica Plain, MA.

As a part of the project, we would like to ask your daughter to fill out questionnaires, surveys and to participate in some interviews that will be about coping, stress, feelings about relationships with friends, family, and other adult women as well as their experiences in the program, Strong Links. The interviews will be scheduled several times throughout the course of the program with one of the researchers and will happen during appropriate school times.

Only the three researchers and program designers will know that your daughter was a part of this study. The people who are a part of the RALLY program will only have study information from your daughter that has been coded with a number. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms (a false name) to identify individual participants.

If your daughter chooses not to participate in the study, she can still participate in the RALLY program. If your daughter ever feels uncomfortable with any of the questions that are being asked, it will be okay for her not to answer them.

We remind you that your daughter’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. Even if she begins the study, she may quit at any time. And even if you agree that she can be a part of the study, the researchers will make sure that she is still interested in being in the study before they begin.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this research project? If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Lindsay Amper at 617-916-9104, Christina Tortolani at 617-304-4540, or Amanda Allen at 215-704-2231.

Who can I contact about my daughter’s rights as a participant? If you have any questions about your daughter’s rights in this project, you may contact Human Subject Research Protection, Division of Research Integrity, 413 Lake Hall, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-7570. You may call anonymously if you wish, that is, you do not have to say your name.

If you do not want your daughter to be a part of this study, please check the box below and have her return this form to Lindsay Amper, Christina Tortolani or Amanda Allen. If you do not return this form, then your daughter can be a part of this research study.

[ ] I do not give permission for my daughter to participate in this research project.

Signature of Parent or Guardian ___________________________ Name of Student ___________________________

Printed Name of Parent or Guardian ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Northeastern University Assent Talking Points for STRONG LINKS Project
(To be read and reviewed with potential subjects)

Name of Student Researchers: Christina Tortolani, M.A., Amanda Allen, MS.Ed, Lindsay Amper, M.Ed.
Title of Project: STRONG LINKS

We are inviting you to take part in a research project because you are a 7th or 8th grade student and are participating in the RALLY program. This project is called Strong Links. It involves a group of student researchers from Northeastern University. They are trying to find out whether the RALLY program helps girls who participate in it. They are asking girls who are a part of the RALLY program to be a part of this research study. If you agree, you be asked to:

Participate in the STRONG LINKS program during the "POD" class time, during which we will

- Participate in art, drama, music, and other activities every week;
- We will also work on an empowerment project where you will have the opportunity to speak up about issues that you and your peers face;
- Ask you questions about your experiences in the program.

We will also be evaluating the STRONG LINKS program and we will:

- Ask you to fill out questionnaires and surveys; and
- Participate in some interviews during the school day.

We would like to tape record these interviews, but it is up to you whether you feel comfortable with this. (After the tapes are transcribed, they will be destroyed). You will still be a part of the RALLY program even if you decided not to fill out questionnaires, participate in interview, or be tape recorded as a part of the Strong Links.

If you ever feel uncomfortable with any of the questions that are being asked, it will be okay for you not to answer them. Similarly, if you do not want some portion of the interview taped, that is okay, too.

It is up to you to decide to be a part of the research project that includes taped interviews and questionnaires. Even if you begin the project, you may quit at any time and you will still continue being a part of the RALLY program.

If you have any questions about the interviews or questionnaires, please ask any of the three student researchers whose names are at the top of this sheet.

Note: Please remind students about access to the counseling services that are available as a part of the program.

Researchers: I have verified that the parent/guardian of this student has not chosen to have their daughter opt-out of the program. I have reviewed this assent with the student, have answered all of their questions and they agree to participate.

_________________________ Initials of Researcher obtaining assent from student
Appendix B

Week 1 – April 29th
2:30-3:20

**Learning Goals:** The purpose of week 1 is to introduce the participants to the group, to set the rules and begin to develop group norms. Additionally, the first group is designed to help the group members and facilitators to get to know each other better.

2:30-2:40
- Snacks
- Introductions & Music explanation
  Each participant will be invited to choose a song that they would like to bring into group to listen to at the start of each group. They will be invited to talk about why they like it, to dance to the music or just to listen to it in the group.

2:40-2:50
- Group expectations/schedule/rules
  - Confidentiality
  - Writing the rules on a poster board – this will be a collaborative effort. The leaders will write some rules, but will encourage the members to help identify the rules that are most important to them.
  - This group is collaborative – they will be shaping where we go with this.
  - You will have the opportunity to tell us what you like and dislike and that will help us to put together plans and activities for the future.
  - Comment & suggestions box. Anonymous.

2:50-3:05
**Getting to know each other game**
- Getting to know you game. The facilitators make a chart that has colors next to categories. The girls are instructed to pick three colors that they feel are the most important to them. They place the colored stickers on their shirts. When they are done, they go around the room and talk to the girls about why they chose the three colors.
  **Categories:** Country of origin, Culture, Family, Neighborhood, Food, Friends, Dating, Being a Girl, School, Religion, Weekend Activities, Appearance, Other

3:05-3:15
**Journal entry:** Introduce yourselves to us. Some things to think about:
*Why did you choose this class over others?*
*Who are you closest with at home?*
*Who are your friends? Why are they your friends?*

3:15-3:20
5 minutes at the end: Strong Links. String beads so that they will eventually create a bracelet. They will string one bead for the group dynamic and will choose another. They can take the Strong Link with them every week as a reminder of what they learned.
Introduce Strong Links – The purpose of this bracelet is to help you to remember what you learned from this group (how you connect family, friends, and community).

**Justification:**

Although Strong Links is not a therapy group, its approach to group dynamics is based on theories from group therapy. The first group meeting is based on Yalom’s (2005) tasks of a group therapist. This session is focused on creating and building a group culture. Once the members of the group have been established, it is the leaders’ responsibility to help members to feel welcome and comfortable in the group. This includes setting up basic rules and beginning to develop group norms. The leaders will be explicit in setting up some basic group rules and norms including confidentiality, respect for others opinions, and being on time. However, it is important that the members are also able to develop group rules and help to create group norms as well. Special attention is being given to building a group culture through the use of a team building activity. This activity will be used in the first session to help the girls to develop relationships with one another (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

There are several components of each meeting that will remain consistent throughout Strong Links. They include the music, snack, check-in, journaling and the Strong Links bracelet. This design is meant to provide consistency and routine for the adolescent participants. Additionally, the music, journaling and Strong Links bracelets activities are drawn from expressive therapies and art education research. Research indicates that non-verbal expression can be a helpful medium for youth to express feelings about painful issues. Additionally, art making helps individuals to calm themselves (Kahn, 1999; Malchiodi, 2005). Strong Links begins and ends with artistic expression each week.

Additionally, the Strong Links bracelet will also serve as a transitional object at the end of the program. A transitional object in the traditional sense is meant to be an object that soothes a child, like the mother does. In this sense, the transitional object is meant to be a tangible object that the participants can bring with them to remind them of the lessons that they learned. It will also serve as a symbolic reminder of the strengthening relationships that the girls built with the leaders and with other members (Tabin, 2006).

Finally, the voice-centered nature of the group is rooted in feminist traditions whereupon characteristics that may have been previously viewed as weaknesses (emotional responsiveness, interindependence) are reframed as strengths (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Further, adopting a feminist, relational view of one’s self, needs and experiences allows for a critical awareness of societal and cultural forces that may shape their thinking and actions and a space where the girls can speak freely, honestly and authentically.
Week 2 – May 6th

Theme: RELATIONSHIPS with peers/boys: connection vs. disconnection
RALLY Goal: BELONGING & and ASSERTION

Learning Goals: The learning goals for this week are to continue to develop teamwork and to develop a more cohesive team spirit. The goals for this week also include helping the team to get to know each other, to learn how to respect each other’s differences and to appreciate similarities and diversity within the group. Introduce the idea that all relationships go through a natural process of growth and change as well as an ebb and flow of connection and disconnection. They will learn to recognize when they use their voices and when they are silenced through personalized vignette examples.

2:30-2:45 Music, snacks, check-in, hope box – introduce the idea and gives each girl a box. Allow them to begin to work on the activity. Decorate the outside with images of hope and/or images that represent you. We will put messages of hope, items, and bracelets inside.

2:45-2:55 Human Knot: Team building activity designed to teach the girls how to problem solve, communicate, encourage each other, how to respect each others boundaries, and work together towards a common goal. Discussion linked to what its like to be in a relationship when things are all “knotted.” We will also include a discussion surrounding working with differences and linking this to relationships at home, in school, at programs.

2:55-3:10 Activity: In dyads, girls share about a time when they experienced a sense of disconnection in a relationship that was important to them. What events led up to it? What did they experience/feel as a result? What did they do or want to do? What was the result? How did they feel then?

Role playing: Girls then chose one of their experiences to act out to group and discuss.

3:10-3:20 Journal: Write a letter to somebody in your life that you need to talk to about something very important. This may be somebody who you have not been able to verbally communicate with about this topic.

Justification:

The hope box is an expressive intervention. The leaders recognize that the girls in this program are potentially dealing with a number of issues that may include poverty, violence in their neighborhoods, and poorly funded education. Their experiences have the potential to have a negative impact on their development. Additionally, these young people may be at greater risk of developing internalizing disorders (Horowitz, et al., 2005). The purpose of creating the hope box is to provide the girls with an opportunity to work on a visual art project that draws on theories from positive youth development. The hope box will be used as a container to hold positive, encouraging messages in addition to projects made throughout the program. Rather than taking a
deficit approach, this program emphasizes the girls’ strengths and encourages them to have hope (Lerner, et al., 2005).

The role-playing also draws from literature on psychodrama. This literature suggests that role playing allows individuals to express and resolve emotions that have not previously been expressed (Landy, 2005).

Together, the activities (human knot and role playing), underlying theme, journal entry and learning goals are based off the central tenets of relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976, 1997). This model suggests that people grow in and through connection and one’s sense of self develops in growth-fostering relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). In this way, connections through relationships can provide a source of learning, nurturance, awareness and growth for the girls that may serve as protective factors in their development.

RCT suggests that there are several key components leading to such relationships. These include mutual engagement, defined as perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship. Authenticity which is the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship. Mutual empowerment, the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action. And the ability to deal with difference or conflict which is the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling. (Jordan & Hartling, 2002; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) By exploring girls' relationships in terms of these relational components, they can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and ebb and flow of their multi-faceted relationships with themselves, their peers, family and community.

Alternatively, the theory also suggests that relationships are inherently characterized by disconnection and that when worked through (responsiveness, respect and a mutual desire to understand each other), can lead to growth and change in the relationship. However, when disconnections become chronic, it may lead to feelings of exclusion, silence, shame and isolation (Jordan, 1992). When hurt or invalidated in relationships, girls may develop a way to protect themselves from further pain and use unhealthy strategies to disconnect or take oneself out of relationship.

Therefore, exploring how the girls understand the relationships in their lives, the sources of disconnection and how they can move through the disconnection and recognizing that relationships naturally cycle through connection and disconnection are foci of Strong Links.
Week 3 - May 13th

Theme: RELATIONSHIPS with family: mutuality
RALLY Goal: BELONGING

Learning goals: The learning goals here are to help the girls to develop perspective taking and to learn how to be assertive and safe in telling people what they need or want. The girls will learn “I statements” to help them to learn how to express their feelings without placing others on the defensive.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box

2:45-3:10 Activity: Role playing: experiencing what our mother/father may be feeling/thinking & expressing what we need/want. Use the vignettes from the journal entries of the girls who are willing to share. We can have some ready if they are not willing to share.

3:10-3:20 Journal: a gift you have received from your mother (or other significant family member). This is not a gift object, but an inherited gift of intelligence, etc.

Justification

The activity, underlying theme, journal entry and learning goals are based off mutuality, another aspect of the relational-cultural model. Mutuality in close relationships refers to the bidirectional movement of feelings, thoughts, and activity between individuals in relationships. It also involves a shared sense of relationship that transcends the immediate and reciprocal exchange of benefits (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992). Mutuality is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other person’s state (Jordan, 1999). Exploring the girls’ sense/perception of mutuality may facilitate increased intimacy, self-disclosure, emotional resiliency, coping strategies and social support in their relationships.
Week 4 – May 20th

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS
RALLY Goal: REFLECT

Learning goals: The purpose of the runes is to choose symbols that will be a reminder for how they can cope in the future. They will be told that they can carry the runes with them and hold them in their hands when they are feeling stressed. This is a grounding technique from counseling skills that will be taught to the girls as a way to manage anxiety and stress.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-in, hope box

2:45-3:00
Activity: Introduce a discussion on stress, stressful life events, environments, situations etc. The girls will have a chance to share a stressful time in their lives. We will discuss ways that they have coped with stress in the past. The activity for the day is to develop clay runes. Runes are clay shapes with symbols carved into them. The girls will be able to choose symbols that they want and will carve them into the clay. They can make as few or as many as they like. The runes need to be baked to be hardened, so we will take the girls to bake the runes. We will invite the girls to make a box to hold them in so that they will be protected.

3:00-3:10
Vote on topics for next week’s project. We will ask the girls during the semi-structured interview about something that they would like to change (in their school, neighborhood etc.) and then we will present all of the topics to the girls and have them vote.

3:10-3:20 Journal

Journal on-line/ organizing oneself/ staying connected/reflection: How do you define stress? Share about somebody in your life who has experienced a very stressful time. What happened? How did they respond to it? Would you have handled it the same way or differently?

Justification

Exposure to repeated stress affects, among other things, communication. When reality is overwhelming, painful, or confusing, communication can suffer (Heineman, 1998; Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents can be left without a framework to name body-states, experiences, urges, and needs and coping with these can be very difficult (Baron, 1992; Strong, 1998; Schwartz, 2000). When exposed to daily stressors at high levels, as urban adolescents are, compounded trauma can occur (Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents may be unequipped to deal with this intense level of stressors, so this activity is designed to provide a concrete stress management and coping skill that can be used everyday. The runes activity is based in the grounding skills, exercises that are designed to keep individuals "grounded" in the present moment, rather than experiencing high levels of anxiety or worry, concern about the future, or zoning out (Linehan, 1993).
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Week 5- May 27th

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS, SETTING GOALS, BEING PROACTIVE
RALLY Goal: ASSERT: To be able to participate meaningfully and productively and to help students to find pro-social ways to conduct selves.

Learning goals: The goals of this project are to help the girls with working together to accomplish a change project. They will learn how to brainstorm, respect each others ideas, and how to develop and create a group project. The ultimate goal of this project is to help the girls learn how to set goals, be proactive, and assertive. We want the girls to be able to recognize a problem and learn how to take action.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box

2:45-3:10 Activity: Today the girls will be presented with different options for discussing this issue. They can choose from writing a collective poem, doing an art project like a collage, banner, or diorama, writing a letter, creating a video about an issue at school. The ultimate goal will be for them to present it to the appropriate administrative staff. Today’s goal is to have them pick an issue and a way to express it. We will begin working on the project today. The girls should decide who they want to invite to the presentation so that the group leaders can send out invitations to invited guests.

3:10-3:20 Journal on-line/ organizing oneself/ staying connected/reflection
Talk about how today’s group went. Did you feel like your voice was heard? What was it like to work on a change project with a group of peers? Did you feel like there was a lot of conflict?

Justification

The activities for weeks five and six are drawn from theories of critical education, feminist theory, and expressive interventions. Critical education encourages youth to question the status quo and empowers them to think critically about ideas (Shor, 1992). In addition to questioning status quo, feminist theory asserts that there should be an element of social change as well. This portion of the curriculum works with participants on identifying a problem and working on a social change project (Ballou, et al., 2002). Expressive interventions are being used because research supports using the arts to help young people express their emotions (Malchiodi, 2005).
Week 6- June 3rd

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS, SETTING GOALS, BEING PROACTIVE
RALLY Goal: ASSERT: To be able to participate meaningfully and productively and to help students to find pro-social ways to conduct selves.

Learning goals: The goals of this project are to help the girls with working together to accomplish a change project. They will learn how to brainstorm, respect each others ideas, and how to develop and create a group project. The ultimate goal of this project is to help the girls learn how to set goals, be proactive, and assertive. The girls will have an opportunity to use both verbal and nonverbal expression in achieving goals and expressing their views.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box

2:45-3:10
Activity: Today the girls will continue to work on putting their project together. The girls will also need to determine who should be invited to their presentation and will make invitations and work on distributing them to the appropriate people.

3:10-3:20
Journal on-line/ organizing oneself/ staying connected/reflection: Do you feel that your voice is stronger as one or as a group?

Justification

See week five.
Week 7 – June 10th

*Theme:* MEANINGFUL EVENTS, SETTING GOALS, BEING PROACTIVE

**RALLY Goal:** ASSERT: To be able to participate meaningfully and productively and to help students to find pro-social ways to conduct selves.

**Learning goals:** The goals of this project are to help the girls with working together to accomplish a change project. They will learn how to brainstorm, respect each others ideas, and how to develop and create a group project. The ultimate goal of this project is to help the girls learn how to set goals, be proactive, and assertive. The girls will have an opportunity to use both verbal and nonverbal expression in achieving goals and expressing their views. The goal of this presentation is to empower the girls to make changes in their lives. Through this process they will learn about the process of change. Because it is impossible to predict if any change will be made as a result of their efforts, a discussion around perseverance, the change process, and disappointment will be included.

2:30-3:00 Present their project

3:00-3:10 Celebration of their accomplishments!

3:10-3:20

Journal: What was it like to be “heard” by the listeners at today’s presentation? What does empowerment mean to you? (We will explain this to them first)

**Justification**

See weeks five and six.
Date to be determined

Themes: Our cultural selves and sharing ourselves with the group

RALLY Goal: ACTION: Organizing oneself; REFLECTION: Sense of self, meaning & vision

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box)
2:45-3:00
Activity: “My Story/ Life map”-My life’s timeline so far and going forward: to gain perspective on their life history, what events have impacted them, vision for self in future.

3:10-3:20
Journal/ organizing oneself/ staying connected/reflection: pick a part of your timeline and tell us about it. What helps us to achieve goals?

Invite Sandra Melo, former Curley student, to come in and talk about her life map.
Date to be determined

_theme:_ Self – who we are, where we come from, and who we are becoming

RALLY Goal:

**Learning Goals:** Introduce this as a way for us to see how our past has had an impact on our present and perhaps on our future. Also this activity will help the girls to gain perspective on their life history and to develop a vision for their self in the future. This is related to the ecological model in that we want the girls to see how the multiple influences on their lives. In our own demonstrations, we will show religious, cultural, familial, educational, etc. influences on our development. Learning goal: By allowing continued time to work on this project with the assistance of adult mentors, the girls will begin to get a sense for how to work on a long term project, will understand time management, planning, follow through, and will ultimately be able to feel pride in finishing a project that is representative of who they are.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box
   Linking the Obama family to this. Read pieces of Obama’s book and information from Michelle Obama.

2:45-3:00 Continue the Road of Life. Make a road with road signs. Show our own visual representation of it so that the girls can understand the concept behind it. They can choose a period of life (i.e., middle school) or can start at birth and go to the present. We will show them three different options.

3:00-3:20
Affirmations: Each girl writes a note of affirmation to each girl which we will add to their hope box.
After school (date to be determined)

Theme: SELF & and EMPOWERMENT
RALLY Goal: REFLECTION.

Learning goal: The learning goal for the showcase is to help the girls to develop public speaking skills and to feel empowered by telling their stories.

3:30-4:00 Snack, check-in and set up.

4-5:00
Activity: SHOWCASE. Invite family, friends, RALLY staff, and teachers to hear the girls present their stories. This will be a challenge by choice, but the girls will be encouraged to share their lives with others.
Activity: pots with “flowers of growth” (time permitting)

5:00-5:30. Photographs & recognitions. Photographs of the girls with their completed artwork, the other group members and special guests will be taken. The purpose of this is to make the girls feel that they are important and to provide them with recognition for their hard work. Additionally, the girls should be recognized for telling their stories and for helping others to understand who they are and where they came from. Each girl will be provided with a special recognition.

Justification

Empowering education, as described above, guides this session (Shor, 1992). Additionally, positive youth development is a guiding principal in the design of this session. The girls are encouraged to build upon their strengths and are recognized for their accomplishments rather than their deficits (Lerner, et al., 2007). Developmental assets framework also guides the design. Of particular interest is the empowerment asset. Research indicates that youth feel empowered when they feel that they are useful. The goal of this showcase is to help the participants to see that they are important young women with important stories to tell (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Finally, schools are often environments where youth feel disempowered. Research indicates that the girls in particular struggle with finding and using their “voice” (Fine, 2003). The purpose of a “showcase” is to allow the girls a space to express themselves.
STRONG LINKS
A Strength-Based Program for Adolescent Girls
A Group Manual

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RALLY
The Strong Links program has been conceptualized and developed through the framework of the RALLY program, developed by developmental psychologist, Gil Noam. RALLY is part of McLean and Harvard University’s Program in Education, After-school and Resiliency (PEAR). Through theory, practice, and research, RALLY aims to provide an integrated model of mental health services and educational support to students in school and after-school settings. It is an inclusive, strength-based model of intervention that helps build students’ competence and resilience through relationships with positive adult figures and works in collaboration with families, teachers, school administrators, community programs, mental health professionals, and others to support students' success. RALLY’s guiding principles aim to “bridge” the many worlds (school, after-school, family, and community) of youth. Together, these principles have guided the researchers to develop a program that reflects these core values and vision for youth.

A Strength-Based Approach to Understanding Girls’ Development
A critical change in the understanding of girls’ development is a shift away from focusing on girls’ problems to one focusing on their strengths; a shift from the individual to one that captures contextual and environmental factors that influence their development. This incorporates and validates the diversity of experiences, contexts, challenges and opportunities that urban girls face. It allows for stereotypes to be deconstructed and traditional theories to be reframed. This alternate way of thinking about girls’ development moves us beyond a fixation on their deficits to a trajectory that is inclusive of adaptive and positive outcomes and development. This strength-based conceptualization that girls can become empowered, build on their assets and advocate for themselves and their communities serves as the foundation upon which the program, Strong Links, was developed.

Participatory Action Framework
Although school is among the most pervasive institutions in the lives of young people in the United States and can become a platform for critical thinking, problem solving and taking action to improve community (Pearrow and Pollack, 2009), schools can also become sources of disconnection. Rather than serving as a path for opportunity and social mobility, schools can perpetuate and legitimize inequalities of race, class and gender (Weis & Fine, 2001). Further, by separating girls’ personal and political worlds, school can become a contradictory and constricting place of learning (Pastor, et al., 2007a). The current program, Strong Links, embraces Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a way for the girls and researchers to cooperate in all aspects of the development of the program in a joint, co-learning process. The program will focus on the meaning of the leaders’ involvement as co-researchers, as the girls engage in critical dialogue about their lives, issues and values. The Strong Links program incorporates several foundational ideas: 1) to focus on the living experiences of the girls, 2) to take an inter-subjective and activist stance, and 3) to place an emphasis on social change.

Group Description/ Goals
This group was originally conceptualized for and implemented with urban adolescent girls in the United States. The initial design of the program was drawn from a small focus group. In this focus group, participants indicated that they had an interest in using the arts, when talking about
relationships and life stressors (i.e. loss of friends). Based on feedback from the focus group and literature, the facilitators/evaluators designed the program Strong Links, using expressive modalities including, but not limited to, art, dance, drama and writing activities. Although overarching themes and activities were designed and set in place, participant input will guide the specifics of each week’s session. Recognizing the need to be flexible with the girls, the program was adapted to meet the girls’ needs as necessary and indicated by their feedback.

The overall goal of the group is to use the arts (i.e. drama, writing, music, art work) to facilitate expression, resiliency, connection, voice and coping skills. Parallel to RALLY’s initiatives to increase belonging, reflection, assertion, and action in adolescents, this group aims to use these as a foundational framework from which Strong Links was built. Strong Links aims to encourage the group process through safety, openness, a sense of mutuality and choice, with the goal of fostering the girl’s use of an assertive and reflective voice within a community where they experience how to connect in a mutual way with peers and adult facilitators. Strong Links supports girls’ strengths in belonging and connecting as a group while gently empowering them to find and use their voices. We also hope that they learn to take responsibility and think critically in learning how to problem solve and plan for the future.

**Group Structure**
Below is a description of the basic structure of Strong Links. The group can and should be adapted to meet the needs of your population and the context in which it is being implemented.

- **Length:** 90 minutes
- **Number of participants:** 8-10
- **Co-leaders:** 2
- **Number of sessions:** 12 (1/week)

**Methods**
Expressive activities using art, music, drama, and movement are used as an avenue to achieve the stated goals. These include reflective activities, such as journaling; active problem solving activities like the human knot; targeted role plays and discussions around issues that are relevant in the girls’ lives; the creation and sharing of food that contributes to connection and nourishment. The design of the activities within the group was based on theories of expressive therapies and art education. Because expressive modalities like art making, drama and dance are non-verbal processes, they can be beneficial for working with adolescents who have a difficult time with verbal expression (Brunick, 1999). Struggles with verbal expression may mean that the young woman is internalizing her feelings [belonging], using physical means to express her feelings, acting destructively toward self or others, and/or being verbally abusive to peers [assertion]. Additionally, the process of art making can be stress reducing as it is experiential and “involves physical action, kinesthetic qualities, and perceptual experiences” [action] (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 19).

**Group Session Format**
*Openings & Endings: The Group “bookends”*
Opening (15 minutes): Each group will begin with an opening. The purpose of the opening period is to assess for the group’s “emotional temperature,” as well as create a period of centering and transition into the work of the group. This can be done in several ways, including:
- Giving a weather report (i.e., “today I am feeling sunny with a chance of clouds”).
- Asking participants to rate their emotions on a scale of 0-10 (i.e., “Today I had a good day, so I am at an 8”).
Opening is meant to be brief and in a taking-turn style.

The opening will also include time spent listening to music. The use of music is used to contribute to a group atmosphere of energy and fun. Girls can choose to dance to the music at the start of each session, talk about the music, or simply listen to it together. During the first session, each participant is asked to provide the name of a song to be played during this time. This allows the girls to express their individuality and preference with the group. At the conclusion of this section, a brief discussion about why a certain song/genre of music were chosen can facilitate connectedness and belonging.

Transition to ending: Cleaning (10 minutes)
Before the group moves toward the ending, it is important to have each girl participate in the cleaning up process. This facilitates a transition and helps the girls create a shared sense of responsibility for keeping the space in order. It also allows the opportunity for the girls to practice organization and teamwork. One facilitator can help with the cleaning up process while the other prepares snack, journals, and beads.

Ending: (20 minutes) Each group will end with snacks, journal writing and bead selection (these beads will eventually be used to make a bracelet on the final day of group). The girls will be asked to come up and pick a snack, get their journal and return to a quiet spot.

Journaling: During this time, it is important to communicate to the girls that this is a time for quiet reflection. They will be asked to reflect on a selected topic in an expressive manner (writing, drawing). Each journal entry will be read and responded to by one of the co-leaders. The goal here is to foster individual mentoring relationships among each of the girls and co-leaders. When they finish their journaling they will return their journal to the facilitator and pick a bead to place inside their box.

Beads: The beads are meant to serve as a transitional object, which will also serve as a positive reinforcement each week for group members. The beads can also represent a “link” between the students, serve as a reminder for the lessons learned and the experiences that they had in group each week. This further promotes belonging to a group but also encourages individual expression because they pick their own beads. A variety of beads will be offered to the girls, including letters that spell out Strong Links. One group facilitator will help with journaling while the other hands out snack and beads.

Guided Activity & Processing (45 minutes)
The Strong Links group progresses from a focus on strengthening and working from belonging within the group, with peers, and with family toward a focus on developing new skills in finding one’s voice/goals and then speaking out. Each activity is introduced by defining the topic/theme for the session and gathering girls’ input as to how it connects to their lives. This is the juncture
at which the facilitators may draw upon creativity and flexibility to meet the needs of their population. For example, when this group was piloted, the theme of “relationships” was introduced and the girls voiced their opinion and desire to talk about intimate relationships with boys rather than the planned discussion on peer friendships.

At the conclusion of each activity, 5-10 minutes is dedicated to a facilitated discussion on the relevance of each activity. For instance, the facilitators may want to ask the girls what they liked or disliked about the activity or provide an adjective that described the activity in their perspective. They may want to ask about what they learned from today and how they might use what they learned outside of the group. The facilitators should also summarize what happened in group that day and the strengths that they noticed in the girls. This process is important in helping them to strengthen their reflection skills.
Session 1: Who are we?

Learning Goals: The purpose of week 1 is to introduce the participants to the group, and begin to develop group norms. For example, facilitators should ask, “What will help us work well together as a team?” Additionally, the first group is designed to help the group members and facilitators to get to know each other better.

Skills: The skills that the girls should gain from today’s group are how to be a productive and cooperative member of a group. They will be practicing listening skills, turn taking, and taking interest in their peers’ stories. They will also develop an ability to talk about their individual differences. In addition, they will develop an ability to take on a group identity, in addition to expressing their individuality.

Justification:
Although Strong Links is not a therapy group, its approach to group dynamics is based on theories from group therapy. The first group meeting is based on Yalom’s (2005) tasks of a group therapist. This session is focused on creating and building a group culture. Once the members of the group have been established, it is the leaders’ responsibility to help members to feel welcome and comfortable in the group. This includes setting up basic rules and beginning to develop group norms. The leaders will be explicit in setting up some basic group rules and norms including confidentiality, respect for others’ opinions, and being on time. However, it is important that the members are also able to develop group rules and help to create group norms as well. Special attention is being given to building a group culture through the use of a team building activity. This activity will be used in the first session to help the girls to begin to develop relationships with one another (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

There are several components of each meeting that will remain consistent throughout Strong Links. They include the music, check-in, snack, journaling and the Strong Links bracelet. The journaling will happen at the end of each session while the girls are enjoying a snack. This design is meant to provide consistency and routine for the adolescent participants. Additionally, the music, journaling and Strong Links bracelets activities are drawn from expressive therapies and art education research. Research indicates that non-verbal expression can be a helpful medium for youth to express feelings about painful issues. Additionally, art making helps individuals to calm themselves (Kahn, 1999; Malchiodi, 2005). Strong Links begins and ends with artistic expression each week.

Additionally, the Strong Links bracelet will also serve as a transitional object at the end of the program. A transitional object in the traditional sense is meant to be an object that soothes a child, like the mother does. In this sense, the transitional object is meant to be a tangible object that the participants can bring with them to remind them of the lessons that they learned. It will also serve as a symbolic reminder of the strengthening relationships that the girls built with the leaders and with other members (Tabin, 2006).

Finally, the voice-centered nature of the group is rooted in feminist traditions whereupon characteristics that may have been previously viewed as weaknesses (emotional responsiveness, interindependence) are reframed as strengths (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Further, adopting a
feminist, relational view of one’s self, needs and experiences allows for a critical awareness of societal and cultural forces that may shape their thinking and actions and a space where the girls can speak freely, honestly and authentically. The Strong Links group is meant to foster within the girls an ability to connect with their peers and belong to a group without sacrificing who they are as individuals. This is a lifelong skill that will be critical in their development.

**Materials:** poster board, markers, beads, small wooden boxes, paints, small colored circular stickers, pre-composed chart with categories for the getting to know you game, Suggestion Box, stereo/speakers/computer to play music each week

**Opening:** 20-25 minutes (The first session has a longer opening because of the need to address the purpose of the group.)

- **Introductions:**
  - The facilitators will introduce themselves and give a brief overview of the group experience. The introduction can sound like this:
    - Strong Links is a 12-week group just for girls created by girls your age. It is meant to provide a space where we can safely and honestly get to know ourselves and each other. We will use music, art, drama, discussion, and other activities each week. Each group will focus on a specific theme, for example, this week we will focus on getting to know each other. We will begin and end the group the same way each week. At the start of group, we will invite you to check-in with the group about how you are feeling that day. You can pass if you are not comfortable sharing for that day. We will also start each group with music that you choose. We will talk about this later. The middle of the group will be an expressive activity of some sort, which you will have input on. The group will end with a check-out, journaling, snack and beading project. We will tell you more about the beading as we go. Any questions so far? (It is likely that they will be quiet at this point.) This group is collaborative, that is, we will work together to make a group that is meaningful to you. If there is a topic that you want to talk about or an activity that makes you feel uncomfortable, we’d like to know about it. Your voice is important in this group. If you are not comfortable talking about your questions, concerns or suggestions for improvement with us or the group, we will provide an anonymous suggestion box. Feel free to leave comments in this box and we will read them and respond in the group.

- Right now we would like to talk about what is going to help us work well together as a team?
  - **Activity:** Discuss this with them. Provide them with several pieces of construction paper. They can trace their hands, cut them out, and then write their approved responses on their hands. Invite them to glue their hands onto a poster board. ****Additionally, be sure to address the importance and necessity of confidentiality****.
Now, we are going to send around a sheet for you to write the name of 1-2 songs that you would like to bring for the group to listen. Choose a group day and we will remind you to bring the music for that group. During your week, you will be invited to talk about why you chose the song. (It may be helpful for you to bring in the song if you have access to it, as they often forget.)

Group activity: 40 minutes

**Knowing ME...My name:** Spend time on the names of the group participants (i.e., the origin/meaning of their names.) This provides a window into getting to know one another on many facets including, ethnicity, family names, middle names, nicknames, among others.

**Getting to know each other game**
- Getting to know you game. The facilitators make a chart that has colors next to categories. The girls are instructed to pick three colors representing the categories that they feel are the most important to them. They place the colored stickers on their shirts. When they are done, they go around the room and talk to the girls about why they chose the three colors.
  - **Categories:** Country of origin, Culture, Family, Neighborhood, Food, Friends, Dating, Being a Girl, School, Religion, Weekend Activities, Appearance, Other

**Memory game:** 5-10 minutes
- Turn the naming process into a memory game by asking someone to volunteer to give names, middle names, and nicknames of each group participant.

**Introduce hope box, bracelets, snacks and journals:** 20 minutes
- **(To say to the girls)** Each of you will get your own hope box. (Give each girl their box at this time) What does hope mean to you? (Have a very brief discussion about that, and let the girls know that they will begin work on it next week.)
- Have the girls write their names on the bottom of the boxes.
- **(To say to the girls)** Each week you will pick out a colored bead that you like and that symbolizes the completion of a session. Inside your box you’ll find the letters to spell out Strong Links. (The facilitators have already placed beads spelling out Strong Links inside of each participant’s box.) Each of the beads that you pick at the end of the group will be used with the lettered beads already in your box to make a bracelet that says Strong Links. We will complete the bracelet together during the last week of group. **Introduce Strong Links—** The purpose of this bracelet is to help you to remember what you learned from this group (how you connect family, friends, and community).
- **(To say to the girls)** You will also have the opportunity to journal at the end of each group. Before we journal and have snack, we will need to clean up as a team. If everybody helps, this will happen quickly. You will get a journal and snack and will have about 15 minutes to write and eat. We will give you a prompt, but you do not have to respond to it. In your journal you can write, draw, collage, illustrate a comic, write a poem or a song. Whatever you want to do to express yourself. One of us will read/look at your journal each week and we will respond to you. When you come back the following week you will have the opportunity to read our responses. You can respond to us but you
do not have to if you don’t want to. You will have the opportunity to decorate your journal next week.

• After your explanation, ask the girls to come up and get a snack and their journal. (It is best to have this on a separate table away from the girls so that they can come up one at a time to get their snack. This method prevents chaos.

**Ending: (5 minutes)**

In their journal, the girls will be asked to write about: *one expectation or hope that they have for this group*. Following answering this question, remind the girls to give their journal to a facilitator and to take their box over to the other facilitator to pick out their bead. These will be stored in their Hope Boxes.
Session 2: Relationships

**Learning Goals:** The learning goals for this week are to continue to develop a sense of connectedness and belongingness within the group. The goals for this week also include identifying and exploring the girls’ relationships.

**Skills:** To develop a means of connection and belonging while exploring and reflecting on their relationships; to feel safe to “be real” in the group setting. To acknowledge differences in relationships and develop relational skills to work through them. To teach the girls how to problem solve, communicate, encourage each other, respect each other’s boundaries, and work together towards a common goal.

**Justification:** Together, weeks 3 and 4 focus on activities, underlying themes, journal entries and learning goals that are based off the central tenets of relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976, 1997). This model suggests that people grow in and through connection and one’s sense of self develops in growth-fostering relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). In this way, connections through relationships can provide a source of learning, nurturance, awareness and growth for the girls that may serve as protective factors in their development.

RCT suggests that there are several key components leading to such relationships. These include mutual engagement, defined as perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship. Authenticity which is the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship. Mutual empowerment, the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action. And the ability to deal with difference or conflict which is the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling. (Jordan & Hartling, 2002; Jordan, et al., 1991) By exploring girls’ relationships in terms of these relational components, they can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and ebb and flow of their multi-faceted relationships with themselves, their peers, family and community.

Alternatively, the theory also suggests that relationships are inherently characterized by disconnection and that when worked through (responsiveness, respect and a mutual desire to understand each other), can lead to growth and change in the relationship. However, when disconnections become chronic, it may lead to feelings of exclusion, silence, shame and isolation (Jordan, 1992). When hurt or invalidated in relationships, girls may develop a way to protect themselves from further pain and use unhealthy strategies to disconnect or take oneself out of relationship.

Therefore, exploring how the girls understand the relationships in their lives, the sources of disconnection and how they can move through the disconnection and recognizing that relationships naturally cycle through connection and disconnection are foci of Strong Links.

**Materials:** paper with concentric circles, markers, hope boxes, speakers/stereo/computer to play music (each week)
Opening: (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.

Group activity: (45-55 minutes)
- **Activity #1: Social circles (20 minutes)**
  - (To say to the girls): Facilitate a discussion about relationships
    - How do you define a relationship?
    - Who are we in relationships with? (families, friends, significant others, teachers, and community)
    - Are relationships important to you? Why? How?
    - What are some ways you would describe your relationships? (Prompt the girls to talk about each type of relationship).
    - Are there certain relationships that you feel are easier to manage? Enjoy more than others?
    - How about relationships that are hard for you? Make you upset?

- **Activity #2: Human Knot: 20-25 minutes**
  - (To say to the girls): Ask girls if they have ever participated in a human knot.
    - Split girls in two groups and explain the directions of activity:
      - Standing in a circle, girls reach across and take hand of another girl in circle (cannot be next to you). Repeat with left hand (cannot hold hands of same person). The group then tries to unravel the "human knot" by unthreading their bodies without letting go of each other’s hands.
  - (To say to the girls): Begin discussion by asking what this activity was like for them? Easy? hard? Frustrated? Exciting?
    - Then link to metaphor of a “knotty relationship”. Ask girls what they think its like to be in a relationship when things are all “knotted.” Facilitate a discussion surrounding working with differences and linking this to relationships at home and in school.
      - Working thru “knots” in relationships:
      - Think of a relationship that is important to you and a “knot” in that relationship
      - What can we do to work thru problems/ issues?
      - Is it sometimes good to have knots? Are there certain things that bring up knots more than others (i.e., boys, culture, how we dress)?
      - Does it help to think about what OTHER PERSON IN RELATIONSHIP may be feeling/thinking?
      - Is it hard to express what we need/want?

Transition: (5 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)
In their journal, the girls will be asked to: “Write a letter to somebody in your life that you need to talk to about something very important. This may be somebody who you have not been able to verbally communicate with about this topic.”

- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- Let them know that this does not have to be shared with the person, but could be if they wanted to do so.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- After answering this question, remind the girls to give their journal to a facilitator and to take their box over to the other facilitator to pick out their bead. These will be stored in their Hope Boxes.
Session 3: Relationships

**Learning Goals:** The girls will be able to share experiences of using their voices in relationships and brainstorm ways that can help them build relational and leadership skills, such as assertion. They will be able to discuss potential challenges (disconnections) in relationships (disagreements, differing opinions, physical fighting) and strategize ways to approach these disconnections.

**Skills:** To practice assertion skills and think reflectively about their relationships.

**Justification:** See week 2

**Materials:** Slips of paper with dyads for role playing activity, hope box

**Opening: (15 minutes)**
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.

**Group activity: (45-55 minutes)**
- **Activity #1:** Connections & Disconnections: 20 minutes
  - *(To say to the girls):* Facilitate a discussion about experiencing connections and disconnections in relationships:
    - What comes to mind when someone says they feel “connected” to someone? Disconnected? Understood? Misunderstood?
      - (consider using the chalkboard to brainstorm and write their descriptions)
  - Hand out 2 index cards to each girl and ask them to label one “connection” and the other “disconnection.”
  - *(To say to the girls):* Write 3 qualities of what it feels like when you feel a sense of connection in a relationship that is important to you on a card labeled “connection.” Then write 3 qualities of what it feels like when you feel a sense of disconnection in a relationship on a card labeled “disconnection.”
  - Ask girls to share and consider these questions:
    - What does it feel like to be connected/disconnected? (ask girls to provide examples of relationships from their own lives)
    - What types of things lead to connections/disconnections?

- **Activity #2:** Role playing: 30-40 minutes
  - Hand out index cards with names of well known partners/couples (please try to choose celebrities that represent diversity in race and sexual orientation). It may help to have a description of the character couples.
    - Examples: Obama’s, Beyonce/JayZ, Ellen & Portia & Will Smith/Jada.
  - Ask girls to find their partner, sit down together and begin to brainstorm a possible role-playing scenario of a misunderstanding/disconnection in the relationship.
Ask for 2-3 groups to volunteer to perform.

- After each performance, have all girls collectively discuss how the character “couple” can work to resolve the disconnection.
- Wrap up activity with a brief summary of experience/ important learning points

**Transition: (5 minutes)**

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**

In their journal, the girls will be asked to write about: a gift you have received from a significant family member or a family member that you look up to). *This is not a gift object, but an inherited gift, such as that of intelligence, or compassion.*

- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- After answering this question, remind the girls to give their journal to a facilitator and to take their box over to the other facilitator to pick out their bead. These will be stored in their Hope Boxes.
Session 4: Who we are and what we hope

Learning Goals: The learning goals for this week continue to include helping the girls to get to know each other, create a sense of belonging, and to learn how to respect each other’s individual differences and to appreciate similarities and diversity within the group. This group will also facilitate self-expression and help the girls to develop a personal understanding of their hopes for the future.

Skills: To develop a means for self-expression through art. The goal is to help the girls to explore multiple ways to express themselves through both art and conversation and also to talk about the potential benefits of creating art. The girls will also develop an ability to use positive thinking about the future.

Justification: Decorating the journal is an expressive intervention. This allows the girls to explore colors, textures, images, and words that are important to them. It also provides them with a nonverbal means to express who they are while also remaining in connection with the facilitators and the peers in the room. This project facilitates belonging within the group but also encourages the girls to create a core sense of self through their art project. The hope box is also an expressive intervention. The leaders recognize that the girls in this program are potentially dealing with a number of issues that may include poverty, violence in their neighborhoods, and poorly funded education. These experiences have the potential to have a negative impact on their development. Additionally, these young people may be at greater risk of developing internalizing disorders (Horowitz et. al, 2005). The purpose of creating a hope box is to provide the girls with an opportunity to work on a visual art project that draws on theories from positive youth development. The hope box will be used as a container to hold positive, encouraging messages in addition to projects made throughout the program. Rather than taking a deficit approach, this program emphasizes the girls’ strengths and encourages them to have hope (Lerner et al., 2005).

Materials: journals, magazines (it is recommended that you have pages already cut out of the magazines because girls may get lost in reading articles and overwhelmed by a large number of materials), markers, pens, colored paper, glitter, crayons, glue, wood paint, paint brushes, water cups, stickers, decoupage materials (modge podge), speakers/stereo/computer to play music (each week)

Opening: (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Remind the girls that this will be brief and that the group will be transitioning to other activities. It is best to play the music softly so that the girls do not get over stimulated and have a hard time calming down. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it. When the song is over, turn off the music, thank the individual for sharing this music. You can comment on the girls’ strengths (dancing, drumming, listening skills etc.) at this point. If the girls are very excited about the music and are having a hard time transitioning, remind them they music will be played every week at the beginning of group.
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Group activity: (45-55 minutes)

- **Activity #1**: Personalize the journal – 20 minutes
  - *(To say to the girls)*: You have the opportunity to make this journal your own. Decorate it with images, words, pictures, and colors that represent who you are.
    - Handout their journals and have the glue, magazine images, markers, crayons, stickers, paper, scissors and glitter already out on the table
  - At 15 minutes warn the girls that we will be transitioning to a new activity and ask them to put the finishing touches on their journal. During the activity encourage them to share what they are choosing for their journal so that the girls begin to get to know each other. Facilitators should be circulating around the room and talking to the girls about their choices. They may choose to help the girls to find images or words that they are looking for and cannot find.
  - Provide a 5 minute warning for finishing this project up
  - In order to facilitate the transition, collect the journals from the girls and place them on a table away from the girls. If you allow them to keep the journals, they will be distracted and have a difficult time transitioning to the next phase of the group.

- **Activity #2**: Your image of hope – creating your hope box – 30-35 minutes
  - *(To say to the girls)*: Facilitate this conversation and help them when they are stuck.
    - What does the word “hope” mean to you?
    - Why might it help us to have hope for the future?
    - What are different kinds of things that we might hope for?
    - Can we use hope as a way to set goals for the future? How?
  - Return their hope box. One facilitator should be doing this while the other is facilitating the conversation.
  - *(To say to the girls)*: This box is your hope box. On the outside of it we want you to think very carefully about what you are hoping for in the future. Perhaps it is to finish high school, to become a fashion designer or a doctor, perhaps it is a hope that your family will all stay together. Whatever hope you have, think about what words, images, colors, or designs would best represent this hope for you. This box will be used to store your beads each week while you are in Strong Links. After group ends, we hope that you will use the hope box as a way to remind you of what you are hoping for in the future. It can serve as a visual reminder of what you want to work towards. You can keep phrases, notes, or words of encouragement inside of it so that when you are feeling sad, hopeless or like you don’t know what to do, you can look to your hope box as a reminder of what you want and can do.
    - Allow the girls to paint, draw, and collage on their boxes.
    - If they don’t finish, let them know that they can complete it next week.
    - Invite one girl at a time to bring their boxes to the drying and bead table
  - Quick processing: *(To say to the girls)*: What did you learn today? What did you like or dislike? Did you notice any change in how you were feeling today when
you were able to engage in the art activity? (You can use this as an opportunity to talk about how creating art can be calming, invigorating, fun, and distracting!)

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *What do you most hope for in the future?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 5: Finish hope boxes and work on inside/outside box (i.e. What we show people on the outside and what is on the inside).

Learning Goals: The girls will be able to reflect on thoughts and feelings that they harbor within themselves and whether and when it is a good idea to share their internal experience with others. They will also be able to critically reflect upon how others see them.

Skills: They will develop a means for self-expression through art. The girls will be able to explore multiple ways to express themselves through both art and conversation.

Justification: These art projects provide the girls with nonverbal means to express who they are while also remaining in connection with the facilitators and the peers in the room. These young people may be at greater risk of developing internalizing disorders (Horowitz et. al, 2005). The purpose of creating the inside/outside box is to provide the girls with an opportunity to work on a visual art project that encourages them to think about how they present themselves to others and what they keep inside of themselves. This will help them to think about when it is important to share pieces of their internal world with others. It will also help them to think critically about how their behaviors are received by others.

Materials: hope box and hope box materials, shoe boxes or jewelry boxes for inside/outside box, colored paper, magazines, quotes, other art materials for decorative purposes

Opening: (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Remind the girls that this will be brief and that the group will be transitioning to other activities. It is best to play the music softly so that the girls do not get over stimulated and have a hard time calming down. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it. When the song is over, turn off the music and thank the individual for sharing this music. You can comment on the girls’ strengths (dancing, drumming, listening skills etc.) at this point. If the girls are very excited about the music and are having a hard time transitioning, remind them they music will be played every week at the beginning of group.

Group activity: (45-55 minutes)
- Activity #1: (20 minutes) Allow the girls to finish the hope box.

- Activity #2: (35 minutes) Inside/Outside Box.
  - Facilitate a conversation about parts of ourselves that are not visible to others. Talk about what other people see when they look at you. This can begin with physical characteristics and move to personality characteristics, activities that they are involved in and how they behave in school, at home etc. The facilitator can begin with an example. I think that when people see me they see a woman who is kind and helpful. I think that people see a counselor in training, a student, and somebody who is motivated. They also see that I can worry a lot and can get
easily frustrated. It is a good idea to include both positive and negative characteristics.

- While there are some things that people see when they look at you or when they talk to you, there are other thoughts and feelings that you don’t willingly show to others. Lots of people hide things for lots of different reasons. Provide another example: People may not know when I’m feeling sad because I always smile, even when I’m not feeling happy.

- **Introduce the activity:** On the outside of your box, put images and words that represent what you show others and what others see when they meet or talk with you. On the inside of your box, put images, words, and thoughts that represent what you don’t show others or what people don’t see when they look at you. You do not have to show the group anything from the inside of your box if you are not comfortable doing so.

- **Sharing:** 5-10 minutes prior to the end of the activity, ask the girls to share one thing from both the inside and outside. This is a challenge by choice: Nobody has to share if they are not comfortable doing so. Ask the girls how they might move something from the inside to the outside? Is it always important to do that? When would you know if you should try to move it from the inside to the outside?

**Transition cleaning:** (5-10 minutes)

**Ending:** (15-20 minutes)

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *What would it be like for you to show something from the inside of your box to people?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes
- Check for any final cleanup needs
Session 6: Real Women Have Curves

**Learning Goals:** This session will include reflective discussion on a film that addresses the importance of positive body image and its relationship to self.

**Skills:** The girls will develop their ability to recognize strengths in themselves and others. Media literacy and critical thinking skills will also be developed as the girls learn to filter information they receive from the media and form their own opinions. The girls will develop a critical voice by learning how to resist conforming to messages presented to them.

**Justification:** The information presented on body image will help the girls to feel less of a sense of isolation as they learn that others also struggle with trying to live up to unreal expectations/images.

**Materials:** video

**Opening: (15 minutes)**
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, turn off the music and help them to remember (if they are having trouble transitioning) that music will be played each week.

**Group activity: (45-55 minutes)**
- **Activity:** Introduction to movie, Real Women Have Curves: 70 minutes
  - SAY: Today we will be watching a movie about “Anna, a beautiful Mexican American girl who has just completed HS living in East LA with a hard working family. Anna’s graduation from upscale school in Beverly Hills is hailed as a huge accomplishment- at least that’s how her mentor sees it. He wants A to apply to college but A deeply tradition mother insists that she stays home and help sister in a dress making factory. A works in factory but simultaneously applies to Columbia University. In addition to learning about injustices of business she also awakens her mother, sister and co-workers to idea that they are more than just pretty pictures, wives or mothers. They are real people with a lot to offer and should not be misled by body image put forth by stores.”
  - As facilitators watch movie, take notes of parts that you deem important based on what you know about the girls, their lives, etc.
  - At conclusion of watching 60 min. of movie, ask girls for initial impressions, thoughts…

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**
- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *What does being a real woman mean to you? Your culture?*
• Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
• In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
• Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
• Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 7: Real Women Have Curves

Learning Goals: This session will include reflection and planning for a visual arts activity that incorporates the importance of positive body image, connections, achievements, pride, culture and self-esteem. A sense of community/belonging will also be the focus as the girls will create a Strong Links banner. The girls will become stronger as a group in learning how to oppose the societal/conformist message.

Skills: The girls will further develop their planning, organization and communication skills (negotiation and compromise) as well as creativity.

Justification: Similar to other weeks, this is another form of expressive based technique; the banner is a powerful avenue for expression, critical thinking and connection.

Materials: banner materials (fabric scraps), paint or markers, beads, yarn

Opening: (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, turn off the music and help them to remember (if they are having trouble transitioning) that music will be played each week.

Group activity: (45-55 minutes)
- Activity #1: Real Women Have Curves: 20 minutes (or remainder of movie)
  - Group discussion around quotes (10 min)
    - “How dare someone tell me what I should look like or how I should be when there’s so much more to me than just my weight.”
    - “I want to be taken seriously. Respected for how I think, not how I look.”
    - “This is who we are- real women.”

- Activity #2: Strong Links banner: 30 minutes
  - Introduce idea of banner
    - SAY: Think about Anna and all the strengths she saw within herself and her culture. What were some of the strengths that she recognized within her self?
    - What were some of the strengths that she recognized within her culture?
    - Why do you think that she was proud of these things?
    - How do you think that her behavior and choices reflect her identified strengths? Her beliefs about people, the world, your future, your family, and your friends?
    - Now think about yourself. What makes you proud of yourself?
    - What are you proud of within your culture?
How are these things reflected in your actions? Your beliefs about people, the world, your future, your family, and your friends?

Help girls to create banner of sources of pride.

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)

Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.

Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): What part of Anna’s story did you connect with the most or find inspiring?

Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.

In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.

Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes

Check for any final cleanup needs
Session 8: Stress: What stresses us out?

Learning Goals: The girls will be able to identify sources of stress and how they experience it in their bodies.

Skills: Self observation, articulating/expressing sources of stress, increasing awareness of how their bodies store stress and feelings

Justification: Exposure to repeated stress affects, among other things, communication. When reality is overwhelming, painful, or confusing, communication can suffer (Heinemann, 1998; Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents can be left without a framework to name body-states, experiences, urges, and needs. Coping with these can be very difficult (Baron, 1992; Strong, 1998; Schwartz, 2000). When exposed to daily stressors at high levels, as urban adolescents are, compounded trauma can occur (Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents need to be able to identify sources of stress and how they experience it in their bodies and lives before they can develop appropriate coping skills.

Materials: Poster board, markers

Opening: (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, turn off the music and help them to remember (if they are having trouble transitioning) that music will be played each week.

Group activity: (45-55 minutes)
- Activity #1: Stress, Worry and Feeling “knotty”: (20 minutes)
  - Facilitate a discussion on stress (types, reactions to, experiences with)
  - (To say to the girls): How many of you have felt “stressed out” from school? Relationships?
    - What are some other sources of stress? Stressful life events? Environments? Situations? (i.e., taking care of siblings, neighborhood violence, discord in family relationships, peer pressure, fitting in, acculturation, moving a lot, navigating intimate relationships, school).
    - How do you deal with this stress? What helps? What doesn’t? What advice do you give your friends when they are stressed out?
  - Generate a list of stressors that you experience
- Activity #2: Create an image of stress in your body (25 minutes)
  - Draw an outline of your body.
  - Think about different feelings that you have in your body that you think could be associated with stress. Facilitators should talk about somatic symptoms as ways that our bodies show us that we are feeling stress, anxiety, anger, sadness etc. (stomachache, headache, backache, muscle tension). Identify these in your body.
Identify emotions, thoughts, and/or feelings that you think are associated with these experiences in your body.

- Explain that next week we will be generating ideas for dealing with stress.

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *How do you define stress? What is a big stressor in your life? How do you deal with it?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 9: Stress and Resiliency (Clay Runes)

**Learning Goals:** The goal of the clay runes activity involves developing a coping skill to manage anxiety and stress. By choosing a symbol that is meaningful to them (i.e., strength, trust, truth), they will have a reminder of the strengths and positive qualities they embody that will help them to deal with stressors in the present and future.

**Skills:** Brainstorming (and creating) adaptive ways to cope with stressful experiences, memories and worries. This activity allows them to speak about emotional regulation which is transferable to their lives. The physical creation of the rune can also be used as a grounding technique (they can carry the runes with them and hold them in their hands when they are feeling stressed).

**Justification:** The SUDS scale allows students to become aware of their emotional states and intensities; such as, anxiety and worry. This model encourages them to identify triggering experiences so that they can develop a coping plan. (http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/SHY-10-Exposureplan.pdf)

Exposure to repeated stress affects, among other things, communication. When reality is overwhelming, painful, or confusing, communication can suffer (Heineman, 1998; Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents can be left without a framework to name body-states, experiences, urges, and needs and coping with these can be very difficult (Baron, 1992; Strong, 1998; Schwartz, 2000). When exposed to daily stressors at high levels, as urban adolescents are, compounded trauma can occur (Herman, 1997; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents may be unequipped to deal with this intense level of stressors, so this activity is designed to provide a concrete stress management and coping skill that can be used everyday. The runes activity is based in the grounding skills and an affect regulation module of DBT, exercises that are designed to keep individuals "grounded" in the present moment, rather than experiencing high levels of anxiety or worry, concern about the future, or zoning out (Linehan, 1993).

**Materials:** SUDS worksheet and step ladder, clay (assortment of colors), plastic forks/knives for carving into clay, sheet with Chinese symbols, wax paper for finished runes, toaster over (for baking after group).

**Opening:** (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.

**Group activity:** (45-55 minutes)
- **Activity #1: SUDS (20 minutes)** Look at your list of stressors from last week. Talk with girls about how there are different levels of stress. Handout SUDS scale from page four of this curriculum: http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/SHY-10-Exposureplan.pdf. Have each girls individually fill out the scale based on her own stressful experiences. Provide individual guidance. Have the girls choose one situation that they want to work on and that they want to develop a coping plan or goals to work on. Provide them with page 5 from the above curriculum. Have the girls share their plans and seek advice from
peers and facilitators if they need it. Encourage girls to practice implementing the plan over the next week. Introduce this as a long-term goal for managing stress in the future.

- **Activity #2: Runes: (25 minutes)**
  - Introduce activity of making clay runes. The girls will be able to choose symbols that they want/ feel connected to/ would like to improve upon and will carve them into the clay. They can make as few or as many as they like. The runes need to be baked (to harden) after group, so explain that they will get finished runes next week. Introduce this activity as a short-term strategy to deal with stress in the moment.

  - *(To say to the girls):* The activity for the day is to develop clay runes. Runes are clay shapes with symbols carved into them. Although they are soft clay now, once they are baked, they become hard like stones. They can be used to help us focus on staying calm when we are upset or simply to remind us of the symbol we write on it. We can hold the rune, concentrate on how it feels, and count down from 10 as a way to distract ourselves from the stressor and self-soothe.
  - Hand out materials and help girls to roll balls of clay and inscribe runes with symbols.
  - Invite the girls to share which symbols they choose and why they chose them.

**Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)**

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *How do you define stress? Share about somebody in your life that has experienced stress. How have they handled it? What happened? Would you have handled it differently?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 10: Stress, Yoga and Breath

**Learning Goals:** The girls will learn how to use yoga and breathing to manage stress.

**Skills:** Self-soothing techniques, anxiety reduction coping skills, anger management skills

**Justification:** Yoga is a form of exercise that has physical and mental benefits. Yoga can be useful for strengthening and stretching the body. It is also beneficial for calming the mind, centering your self, and reducing tension in your body and mind.

**Materials:** Yoga video and yoga mats

**Opening:** (15 minutes)
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, turn off the music and help them to remember (if they are having trouble transitioning) that music will be played each week.

**Group activity: (45-55 minutes)**
**Activity #1: Discussion and Breathing Game** (10 minutes)
- Follow-up on the conversation from last week. You can refer back to the runes and remind them of their purpose.
- Introduce the concept of breath. To say to the girls:
  - Breath can be used to mindfully calm our minds and our bodies.
- Have them play "air hockey".
  - Roll up a small piece of paper.
  - Have two kids sit across the table from each other and blow the paper across the table. They can't use their hands. Challenge them to deepen breath, use more shallow, and go quickly, slowly with their breath.
  - This is an experiment. Ask them to notice their ability to control the direction of the paper depending upon how they use their breath.
- Once you've processed this, lead them through a breathing exercise.
- You can say something like this,
  - "Close your eyes. Get yourself into a comfortable seated position. Take a long, slow deep breath in. Hold your breath. Now, imagine that your lungs are a big balloon and that you are going to slowly deflate them. Slowly allow air to come out of your mouth, gradually letting the balloon deflate." Ask them to notice how this feels.

**Activity #2: Yoga Video** (45 minutes)
- Show a yoga video and participate in the activity with them.

**Transition cleaning:** (5-10 minutes)
**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *How did your body feel during yoga? What did you like and dislike about the experience?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 11: Relationships and Building Trust

**Learning Goals:** The goals of this session are to continue to solidify trusting relationships and space within the group. The girls will identify aspects of relationships that facilitate and maintain trust; as well as, practice and exercise entrusting one another.

**Skills:** The girls will develop assertiveness skills, the ability to brainstorm and respect each other’s views. They will also learn how to participate meaningfully and pro-socially in a group setting. Although this group is focusing on building trust within the group, this experience will allow the girls to be a part of a trusting social environment. This will provide them with the skills to recognize when and who it’s okay to trust and the potential benefits of allowing yourself to be open with others.

**Justification:** See weeks 6, 7, and 8

**Materials:** bandanas (enough for 1 for each pair of students), music

**Opening:** (5 -10 minutes)
- Check-in without playing music
- They can choose a song to play as their guests are entering. Help the girls to think about what song would be appropriate for their guests and the topic.

**Group activity: Trust Walk (30 minutes)**

Explain to the girls:


**Trust Walk Activity (Taken directly from: http://www.group-games.com/team-building/trust-walk-activity.html)**

The Trust Walk Activity is a team building activity involving leadership and lots of trust as people navigate each other around obstacles. *Instructions*

Find a good location with some obstacles, but nothing dangerous. Some good locations may include the woods or a large field. Form pairs. Ask one partner to be the navigator (guide), and the other to be blindfolded. When the blindfolded partner is ready, slowly spin the person around a few times so that they do not know which direction they are headed. From this point on, the guide should not touch the partner at all, but rely solely on verbal cues (e.g. “About five steps ahead, there is a branch. Step over it slowly.”)

The guide is solely responsible for his or her partner’s safety. He or she should be navigated to avoid obstacles. In this way, participants learn valuable lessons related to teamwork: the guide
learns about the challenge and responsibility of caring for another individual’s well being, while the blindfolded partner learns to trust and rely on another person. Ask participants to reflect and share upon their experiences.

Sample Questions to Ask During Debrief

To help participants reflect and learn upon their experiences, the following are some good sample questions to ask following the Trust Walk team building activity:

- What do you think is the purpose of this team building activity?
- What was it like to be the guide, responsible for the safety of your teammates?
- Why is trust in your teammates important?

(30 minutes): Bridging the trust walk activity to their day-to-day lives. Facilitate a discussion.

- How does this relate to _______ (fill in the blank with the current scenario of the participants, such as class, a sports team, family)?
- How did you feel during this activity? When have you felt in a similar way in your daily life?
- What helped to facilitate trust during the walk? How do you do that in outside relationships?
- Did you have any difficulty trusting your partner while blindfolded? Why or why not? What are times that you have had a hard time trusting people in your life? When is it important not to trust?
- What was it like to try to gain the trust of your partner when you were leading them around blindfolded? What are some times in your life when you had to work hard at gaining others trust?
- How did it feel when you and your teammate successfully trusted each other to accomplish something challenging? What has it been like to experience in your daily life?

Transition cleaning: (5 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)

- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): What was it like to be “heard” by the listeners at today’s presentation? What does empowerment mean to you? (Explain this concept to them first.)
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup.
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Session 12: Celebration!

Learning Goals: The purpose of the final group is to help the girl’s to consolidate their experiences in the group. The final group will focus on the relationships that the girls formed through the group, reinforcing their strengths and supporting their hopes for the future. Most importantly, it is a celebration of the experience!

Skills: The girls will develop skills in thinking and planning for their future. They will also develop skills in giving and receiving compliments.

Justification: Underlying themes, journal entries and learning goals are based off the central tenets of relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976, 1997). This model suggests that people grow in and through connection and one’s sense of self develops in growth- fostering relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). In this way, connections through relationships can provide a source of learning, nurturance, awareness and growth for the girls that may serve as protective factors in their development.

Materials: markers, pens, colored paper, lined paper, envelopes, paper plates, paper towels, pizza, string for bracelets, scissors, camera, speakers/stereo/computer to play music (each week)

Opening: (15 minutes)

- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, today you may or may not decide to leave the music playing for the remainder of the group. Because this is the celebration day, you may be able to be more laid back. Base this decision on the group and if they can handle that throughout the entire group.

Group activities: (45-55 minutes)

Activity #1: (10 minutes) Human knot. Begin this activity with the question: Does this work better now that we know each other? Divide them into the two groups (you must use odd numbers of girls to make this work.)

Activity #2: (10-15 minutes) Bracelets.

To say to the girls: Today we are going to design and construct our Strong Links bracelet. This bracelet can be a reminder to you of all that we did as a group over the past 12 weeks. It can remind you of the friendships and connections that you made with the members of this group and of the lessons that you learned.

- Call each girl up one at a time. Have them pick out a bead and get their hope box. When they return to their seat, the other group leader should meet them there, measure their string out, cut it to the size of their wrist and then tie 1 very large knot at the top of it so that the beads will stay.
- (To say to the girls): Inside your box are the letters “Strong Links” and the beads that you chose. Now you can design your bracelet.
Activity #3: (15 minutes) Affirmations.
(To say to the girls): Now that you have all gotten a chance to know each other, we are going to make some affirmations for each other. An affirmation means that we say something positive about everybody. When we use affirmations, we want to think about characteristics that a person has versus how they look, what they wear, the color of their hair etc. So for instance, you might say that somebody really makes you laugh. Everybody is going to get a small piece of paper. Write your name at the top. We will pass these around the table and everybody can write on them.

Pass out paper and pens. Rotate the papers.
(To say to the girls): Now, each of you can read your paper out loud and celebrate what others appreciate about you. (Once they are done have them place their affirmations in their hope box)

Activity # 4 (5 minutes): Hopes
(To say to the girls) : Now, we’d like you to remember that our hope box was meant to remind us of what we want out of the future. Write down 3 hopes that you want for the future and one idea about how you might be able to make that hope come true. When you are done, we’ll ask that each of you volunteer to read one of them.
When they are done, go around the circle and share (if they are willing.)

(To say to the girls): Now we are going to take a picture. Please put your hopes into your box.
(Arrange the girls in a formation and have somebody take your picture)

Activity #5: (2 minutes): Pictures!
Take a group picture.
(To tell the girls): We will mail this picture home to you so that you have a visual memory of Strong Links and the connections that you made with the people in the group.

Activity #6: (10-15 minutes): Pizza party!  (Hint: Have the pizza on a table set away from the girls and pass out one piece of pizza at a time. This helps to avoid chaos and grabbing!)

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes) Letter to my future self
Letter to self & address envelope. Be sure to show them how to address an envelope as this is not always a skill that they have.
(To say to the girls): Write a letter to your “future self”.
   • So, imagine that you are reading these 5 years from now. What do you want to tell your “future self” about where you wanted to be and what you wanted to be doing 5 years from today? What were you like when you wrote this letter and what would you like to be 5 years from today?
   • We will mail this letter home to you. We will write you a note to read when you open it but you should save your letter to read in the future.
Appendix C

Pre-Group Questionnaire

Demographic information

1. Who do you live with?

2. How old are you?

3. How many siblings do you have? How old are they?

4. Where do you live?

5. Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?

6. Where were you born?

7. Create a family genogram and discuss ages/locations/hx of mental health issues/strengths

Relationships

8. Who are the most important people in your life? What do you value about your relationship with them?

9. Do you have family in the area? Who are you close to in your family, if anybody?

10. Would you say that you have close friends?

11. Do you have any conflict with peers at school? In your neighborhood?

12. How would you define friendship?

Interests and perceived strengths and weaknesses

13. What do you like to do with your free time?
14. What do you think are your strengths? What are you really good at? (I.e. academics, sports, reading, singing etc.)

15. What do you think you struggle with? What is hard for you? (I.e. academics, sports, reading, singing etc.)

16. How would you describe yourself to somebody you never met? How might your friends describe you to a stranger? Your family? Your teachers?

**Assessment of interest and perceived strength in the arts**

17. Do you like art, arts and crafts, dance, drama, writing, poetry, reading and/or music? If so, what do you like?

18. Do you think that you are good at the activities you mentioned in question #3?

19. Are you comfortable with participating in arts activities? What are you the most/least comfortable with?

**Perceived stressors**

20. On a scale of 1-10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how much stress do you think you have in your life?

21. What stresses you out the most in your life?

22. How would you define stress?

23. What do you currently do to help yourself to manage or deal with your stress?
Program specific questions

24. What would you like to talk about/ learn about/ do in this program?

25. What are you most looking forward to in this program?

26. What worries or concerns do you have about participating in this program?

27. Do you have friends in the program?

28. Are there people who you are concerned about being in the program with (you don’t have to mention names).

29. What can the facilitators do to help you feel comfortable?

Expression

30. When you are upset, how do you typically express your feelings, if at all?

31. How do you usually handle a conflict with a peer? Do you talk to them about it? Do you write them a letter? Do you tell a parent? Other ideas?

32. How do you usually express/show anger?

33. If you feel that you are in trouble, are you able to ask somebody for help?
34. When things are bothering you, how do you usually deal with it? Do you talk about it?

**Future oriented questions**

35. Have you thought about high school yet? Where would you like to go?

36. What would you like to do for a job/career when you are older?

37. What is your dream for the future?

38. Have you ever tried to set a long term goal? If so, what was it? Did you achieve it?

**Ecological Assessment**

- Use concentric circles. Have the youth identify what is most important to them and their identity. For instance, this could be people in their lives, organizations, culture, religion, places, etc. They can put as many or as few as they want in each circle.
Appendix D

Post-Group Questions

Expressive Activities Questions

1. Can you tell me about this art work/experience/writing etc.?

2. What did Lindsay, Chris, & Amanda say about doing this particular project?

3. What was it like for you to work on this? (Fun, boring, exciting, interesting etc.)

4. What did you learn from this experience?

5. Did any feelings come up for you while you were doing this? After you did it? During discussion about it in the group?

6. After having completed this, do you feel that you have changed/grown in any way from this experience?

7. What does this……….. say about who you are as a person? A girl? A middle school student?

8. What are you most proud of re: this ……………………?

9. Was this activity a useful way for you to work on some of the issues surrounding………..?

10. This is my interpretation of….. and how I feel about you as a member of the group. What do you think of my interpretation? Is it correct? Wrong? Close?
Satisfaction questions

1. What activities have you enjoyed the most? What did you like about it?

2. What activities did you like the least? What did you dislike about it?

3. How did you feel about the opening, closing, and journal activities? These were consistent across each group so that you had to do them each week. Would you keep or change those aspects of the group?

4. What would you change about the program? What would you keep the same?

5. What did the facilitators do that you liked? Dis liked?

6. Would you participate in a program like this again? Why or why not?

Relationship questions

7. Did you make any new friendships with girls during this program?

8. Do you feel like you got to know the girls in this program well?

9. Did you feel like you got to know the facilitators well? Did you feel supported by them?

10. Did you feel like your specific mentor was there for you and was helpful? Did you form a good relationship with her?

11. How has your experience in this group impacted other relationships outside of the group (if at all)?

Experience

12. Tell me about your experience in this program. What has it been like for you?
13. What were you like before you started this program? Have you changed at all in your thinking, behavior, actions etc.? If you have changed, what specifically about the program helped you to make that change?

14. What have you learned from participating in this program? How have you seen this learning impact your day-to-day life, if at all?

15. At the beginning of this program you described yourself as:……………………., would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

16. At the beginning of the program, you said that you struggled with………………. and were good at …………………. Would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

17. At the beginning of the program, you stated the following about your interest and perceived strength/weakness in the arts………………………………………………………………. Would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

18. Has this program been helpful to you in learning how to manage stress? If so, how?

19. Did this program meet your expectations? (i.e., did it help you to learn what you wanted to learn?) If not, what could the program have done differently to help meet your expectations?

20. Would you describe this program as a safe place for you to express feelings, thoughts, concerns and emotions? If not, what could have been different to help with that?

**Expression**

- Read the girls their answers for these questions from the beginning of the program. Ask them if anything has changed.
- If there has been change, what do they attribute these changes to be related to?
21. When you are upset, how do you typically express your feelings, if at all?

22. How do you usually handle a conflict with a peer? Do you talk to them about it? Do you write them a letter? Do you tell a parent? Other ideas?

23. How do you usually express/show anger?

24. If you feel that you are in trouble, are you able to ask somebody for help?

25. When things are bothering you, how do you usually deal with it? Do you talk about it?
Appendix E

1. Do the girls identify the arts based interventions as an important part of their experiences within Strong Links?

Learning and growing

Reminders – The objects that they made will serve as a reminder to what they learned in group. They will use the items to preserve memories and will look back at their progress since group.

Example: that it was a place for you to think re what you want- hopes for future, something you can hold on to after thru group so you remember the group... a place where you can put special things at home... do you like that?

[12 L]: yeah
Interviewer: so do u think you will use it at home
[12 L]: yeah, probably

Reminders – Example: 11K Cuz hers turned out pretty good. All of them turned out pretty good. So the girls had them. Like I'm glad that we have them, cuz like you know, how some people have things and they just throw it away. I'm glad that the girls like didn't throw they actually have it...

Interviewer: They kept it...it actually means something?
11K It actually means something and that's to remind themselves of what we did back in middle school and what we learned. So yeah, that was a good activity too.

Reminders- Example : When you take it home, what kinds of things do you think you'll put in it?
[8H]: like diff kinds of pics and memories and stuff like that
Interviewer: what kinds of memory of group?
[8H]: pics and different things we have done...in group and outside of group
Interviewer: so give me an example of something you can put in there that you have done
[8H]: the runes, the bracelet,

Reminders–Example: [6F] “Um, I think doing the letter...it was good topics and stuff...in the next 5 years, like I'm going to cry when I read that!

Coping and problem solving Skills – The expressive lessons that the girls did in group helped them to learn coping and problem solving skills for the future.

Example: [2B] You said the clay piece because when you’re going thru something or like showing that anger, you can keep it close to you like in your pocket and you can look at it and maybe remember that it’s a weakness for you and use it to calm down.

Great. Do you think you’ll use that?
I think so.
Example 2:
[2B] I think talking about all the relationships, people go through, I think it helped my stress  a lot.”

Coping and problem solving skills- Example: [1A] Yes it did. If you’re stressed out you can count numbers in your head and doing the runes thing, and hold them in your hand to help you think about other stuff and calm down.

Coping and problem solving skills – Example: Interviewer: has program helped you learn ways you can manage stress at all?
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[12 L]: huh? Interviewer: repeats Q..like for example, remember the runes we made? Use those for stress? Will you try that maybe?
[12 L]: yeah

_Coping and problem solving skills_ – Example: the runes 
Interviewer: Why? [8H]: I liked that you picked something you had to work on and I couldn't draw very well but I appreciate someone helped me-

Interviewer: So, when you think about if this program has impacted you day to day, what do you think?

[8H]: Um, maybe the way you think re your relationships, or deal with stress
I think the different activities...help you think different things...like help you think re your point of view, but also theirs as well
So almost done!!! Has SL been helpful to you in learning to manage stress?
[8H]: Yeah like you don't have to hit things like you can look at this and be reminded that you have faith and stuff like that.
Yeah like one of the nice things about the runes is u can actually touch it...calm ourselves down instead of acting out on our anger, right?

[8H]: yeah.

Interviewer: so when we met a few weeks ago you said when you are upset you express your feelings by...talking about it, yelling and crying...do you think that anything has changed?

[8H]: when I get mad at other ppl, instead I can use this (the rune) I can touch it instead of yelling and screaming

Interviewer: Anything the girls said that could handle anger?

[8H]: Yeah, count to 10

_Coping and problem solving Skills _–
Examples: yeah cause like the runes- if, I'm always going to remember-if I’m scared I can get it and remember...

[6F]: like how my dad was always yelling at me...I will remember not to freak out- just calm myself

Interviewer: like what you wrote in your journal, how you were able to not act out of your anger?

[6F]: yes
Interviewer: do you think its helpful to write re it first like in the journals?

[6F]: yeah cause you can have cause I forget things easily so if I say something, "I'm going to say this to this person or whatever" and they say something else and I say it wrongly, there could be a misunderstanding.

_Coping and problem solving Skills _– The expressive lessons that the girls did in group helped them to learn coping and problem solving skills for the future.
Example: [9I]: yeah we went over this in program...what kinds of things stress us and what we can do: we can count to 10, we can take naps,

_Coping and problem solving Skills _– Examples: Ok. But you were able to work through that frustration?

10J Uh huh.10J Um, I guess these things, the runes I think, cuz those are the ones that I guess tell me things that I need to work on.

Interviewer: Uh huh. And which ones did you choose?

10J Love and anger.

Interviewer: Uh huh. And can you tell me a little bit about that? You said that you have to work on both of those?

10J No, not both of those, um anger. Cuz like I said before, I don't get mad that much, but when I do I get really, really mad. I don't know, like, I don't think about what I'm doing I just do it.

_Coping and problem solving Skills _– Example: Sometimes people have said, well I learned that, so...you said to me that its relaxing, right? So in some ways sometimes girls say that, well I learned that it relaxes me to paint so I can do that again. Did you know that before? 4D (Shakes head no)
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Interviewer: Do you think that it is something that you would try at home?
4D (shakes head yes)

_Growth and change_ – The girls indicated that participating in expressive activities helped them to reflect upon their strengths, weaknesses and goals. Ultimately the activities helped them to work on/improve upon an area of their life
Example: [2B] So I decided to make the hope box and the things in there (points to the handout – runes that symbolize “anger”), um, cause I think it could help me improve the way that I act and the way I am, and um, I think that that could actually help me figure out what are my struggles in life. The little clay things, I chose anger, because sometimes anger is my weakness and um like I get so angry, I go berserk everywhere, I just can’t hold it. I thought it was good to pick that anger piece because anger is what I have trouble with the most.
Example: I think I’ve grown from, let’s say black to like gray. Cause I’m not the way I used to be before. And I’ve changed a lot.

_Growth and change_ - Example: [1A] At times I scream and cry….when I get angry I do stuff I shouldn’t do, I’ve stopped that now. That’s gotten a little better. Example 2: [1A] Yes…I calmed my anger down a lot.

_Growth and change_ – Example: [7G] yeah. um. when we talked in groups about drama and how people categorize other people.
Interviewer: Yeah. And what did you, did you change or change perspective on that?
[7G] Yeah.
Interviewer: You did? What did it change from?
[7G] Thinking good things about other people.
Interviewer: So you changed to think more good things about people you mean?
[7G] Yeah.
Interviewer: And that was because we talked about it and people were honest?
[7G] Yeah.

_Growth and change_ – Example: Interviewer: Do you think anything has changed...way you feel, think, and act since beg of group?
[12 L]: I didn't change way I act but the way feel.
Interviewer: have you learned anything re: yourself?
[12 L]: yes
Interviewer: can you name 1 thing?
[12 L]: like I am better than most ppl think I am...
Interviewer: so you feel better about who you are...do you feel people make judgments about you?
[12 L]: how come?
Interviewer: well, people make judgments about everyone...in group, did you feel people knew you on a deeper level beyond the judgments?
[12 L]: yeah

_Growth and change_ –Example: do you think you have changed or grown in any way because of art projects?...its kind of a tough question but it was something that...
[8H]: It helped you get more open and stuff...
Interviewer: So you got to know the girls and get more comfortable with us by doing the art?
[8H]: yeah

_Growth and change_ Example: [2B] So I decided to make the hope box and the things in there (points to the handout – runes that symbolize “anger”), um, cause I think it could help me improve the way that I act
and the way I am, and um, I think that that could actually help me figure out what are my struggles in life. The little clay things, I chose anger, because sometimes anger is my weakness and um like I get so angry, I go berserk everywhere, I just can’t hold it. I thought it was good to pick that anger piece because anger is what I have trouble with the most.

_Growth and change_ - Example: Interviewer: so at begin of Strong Links, you said sometimes struggled with "being noisy and loud...getting into other people's business...gets me in trouble" do u think u still do that?
[12 L]: yeah
Interviewer: do you think program helped at all to look at that side of you at all?
[12 L]: yeah

_Growth and change_ – Example: [11K] Black I chose cuz sometimes I have anger inside so its like I see blackness inside of me and then I chose yellow as like the bright side of me. Sometimes I have ideas and like a good person. So I chose those to colors cuz like black to me is like when I have anger and I sometimes I do stuff that I wish I went back and never did. And then I chose yellow cuz yellow is like a bright side of me that I'm a good person even though I do things that I should not be doing. I think that I'm a good person, so I chose those two colors.

Example 2: [11K] Well I know we had our little conversation in class, in pod, about girls and boys. That really reminded me of bad things that happened to me with relationships with guys. I know that now these days, its normal that little girls in middle school are already dating. I think that for me I should wait to high school cuz really middle school, already in this school when you go out with somebody its like drama. Words everywhere like we hear stuff everywhere, so like, its not really good. I don't think that going out with guys in school is really good so. I went out with 2 already in school and if I have to go back I would regret going out with them, even though one of them was as good person. But I would actually regret it cuz I don't know, I would just regret it, and I have this thing, like right now I'm feeling like anger towards them cuz I heard some stuff about them but I don't want, even though one of them actually told me the truth about what happened and I'm feeling like really mad at them, but you don't see me going out there like I'm going to beat you up or stuff, I still talk to them but not, I don't trust them like I used to, we make things worse together again, like I don't talk to them or trust them like I used to like a best friend and stuff, so yeah.

Example 3: [11K] Well in the activity, like I told you, the relationship knots, that hand things, I kind of changed on that. Now I realize that some boys try to get at me and stuff so I think about it, I go back and say, look what we talked about...my friend comes back and be like, learn what we talked about in POD. Boys are not worth it right now. We are too young. There is going to be a day and time when we can have fun and when we can do all these kinds of things. Why we doing it at such a young age? So now I'm thinking about like, yeah I go around and play with guys, nothing serious, just talk, be friends. But nothing like, no relationships or nothing right now. I can't be like, oh I'm not going to have a boyfriend cuz I could like somebody out there, but I'm trying to like hold myself, like not to be in relationships at such a young age. Its not worth it. Cuz when I get in relationship I get distracted. I can't do my work. I don't know, I feel like I want to see him like every time, I go around the hallways playing. And then when it comes to work, I don't do my work and I get distracted. And now that I'm single and you know and fine, I'm doing my work. I'm doing pretty fine in school. So I was thinking maybe boys right now, these days, not....

_Growth and Change_–Example: and making these (the runes) with the symbols.
Interviewer: What symbols did you choose?
[8H]: I chose love, and trust
Interviewer: Tell me why u chose love
[8H]: I d k bc love is a good quality and trust b/c it’s hard for me to trust
Hopeful future – Creating the hope box helped the girls to think about their future and what they wanted to accomplish.
Example: 11K Yeah, I chose those 2 colors to remind myself like, why would I do stuff bad when there is going to come consequences and the consequences could be hard. Like last time I was walking to Jackson and this guy came up to me and said lets go steal. And I was like really thinking about. I could get in big trouble and I could be in jail right now for stealing. So that made me, like I was thinking back then when I made that box, I shouldn't be doing things that are bad. I was like, that's why I put down the color yellow, I was thinking the bright side, and I was like no, I'm not going to do that, I was like no you guys go and do it, if you guys want to get in trouble, do it, so that's why I chose those 2 colors and did my box like that.

Hopeful future – Example: Interviewer: did it help u think re your future at all? Like what hopes you may have?[8H]: yeah like looking through the magazines (to decorate the HB), to see what other people have accomplished and what we may be able to accomplish

The Benefits of Expressive Activities
Catharsis – Creating art helped the girls to express thoughts or feelings that were normally tucked away. They site this as a benefit to art making.
Example: It expressed my feelings and my moods and I think that's the good thing about it.
Example 2: I did like it, cause at the end of the POD, you guys would ask some personal questions and some random questions to see what people are thinking about in their heads and what they are going through. Writing it in a journal can take it off their mind. It’s better to express it in a journal than hold it in and holding grudges in their mind.

Girl #2: Catharsis – Example: Interviewer: sometimes for me writing in a journal is getting it out and get that release. Did that help?
[12 L]: yeah.

Girl #3 Catharsis Example: yeah cause like we kind of express your hope in it and you don’t have to leave it inside of you; yeah cause after I did that letter to my sister, I felt better about myself.

Girl #4 Catharsis Example: why do you think its helpful to get it out on paper?
[9I]: bc it feels like all that stuff is being put on that paper...like even though its not directly talking to somebody, you feel better after you write it out
Interviewer: Cause its a relief, right?[9I]: yeah

Girl #5: Catharsis: Example: and silver are kind of like, my colors. And for me, mixing them together and seeing that dark color like, I think it represents my mood and my feelings because usually my feelings are just black, cause usually I’m just in a bad mood, but going through this, at the end, I decided to change the box colors.

Nostalgia and Healing- the activity reminded the girls of a past experience that they remember with fondness.
Example: When I was doing the hope box, I was thinking about my aunt passing away, because me and my aunt, like, we had this treasure chest that we used to mess around with and we actually decorated it ourselves and we used to put like everything in it...

Pleasure – The creative art was an experience that brought the girls joy.
Example: [2B]It was fun because instead of just talking we actually got to do arts and crafts activities and we got to, like, got to design it the way that we wanted it, put it the way we wanted to do it. It was fun.
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Pleasure – Example: [11K] I thought it was fun because all the girls were having fun. They love painting, they decorated their own boxes, not like you guys told us to do this, to do that, we got to do whatever we wanted on our boxes, so I thought that was cool.
Example 2: 11K Yeah but it was fun and everybody was laughing and everybody got along on the game. So I think that was a good game

Pleasure – Example:[1A] It was really fun and good because you can express your feelings and its only girls. No boys, that was good.

Pleasure- Example 1: [7G] painting it.
Interviewer: Ok, alright. Um, so, when you painted it, when you were painting it during group, was there anything about the painting that you really liked doing or was it just....
[7G] It was fun.
Example 2: [7G] The circle that we had to untangle ourselves.
Interviewer: Oh right! What did you think about that?
[7G] That was fun!

Pleasure –Example: Interviewer: tell me re: the HB. What did you like doing re: the HB?
[12 L]: the coloring, the other activities we did to do it...
Example 2: Interviewer: so what did you learn from this experience?
[12 L]: to have fun...like to have fun and don't always be down...
so to enjoy it?
[12 L]: yup
Example 3: Interviewer: What would you change re Strong Links?
[12 L]: Nothing! Its fun!

Pleasure –Example: 11K I thought it was fun cuz all the girls were having fun. They love painting, they decorated their own boxes, not like you guys told us to do this, to do that, we got to do whatever we wanted on our boxes, so I thought that was cool.
Example: [11K] Yeah but it was fun and everybody was laughing and everybody got along on the game. So I think that was a good game

Pleasure – Example: [6F] “…was just happy.”

Pleasure –Example: Interviewer: Did you think this activity was fun? [9I]: Yeah. I just thought it was fun!
Pleasure – Example: : Cool. So did you enjoy doing it?
[10J] It was fun. To me it was fun. It was fun. Like I got to play around with the other girls. Like we would play around, especially with that glitter thing...

Pleasure Example: So what about that did you like, was it fun, exciting, relaxing?
(re: making the runes)
4D Fun.

Relaxation response – The girls indicated that the act of creating art was relaxing and calming.
Example: Do u feel relaxed when you are doing something like this? (she nods) yeah? I like doing art b/c it helps me focus on doing something other than whatever I'm thinking about...like if you have a test the period before and you are stressed out, if you do something artistic, its like your mind goes away, you know. Did this happen for you?
[12 L]: yeah so if you had stressed coming into the room, you didn't really think re them too much?
Example 2: Interviewer: so how did you feel about us doing the same thing each week to start and end group? To start group, we had music, snacks and HB...and we closed every week with journaling.

[12 L]: it was good...those were relaxing...

Relaxation response – Example: Interviewer: so did any feelings come up for you while you were working on the HB?......like maybe feeling relaxed?
[8H]: yeah like if you had a stressful day all you had to do was go work on your box

Relaxation response – Example: Interviewer: so what it nice to have this time during the week to just chill out?
[9I]: yeah.

Relaxation response – Example: Ok. And what was it like when we were actually doing the painting of this box and the decoupage? What was it like to actually make the box? Fun, boring, relaxing...?

4D Relaxing

Challenge – The girls enjoyed activities that challenged them.
Example: You liked to do it. What did you like about it?
4D It was a challenge

Relationships

Part of a whole – Participating in a group expressive activity was important because it helped the girls to feel a part of something bigger than them. They liked being able to collaborate and work with others.
Example: Interviewer: How about the human knot? What did you think of that?
[12 L]: that was fun too! We had to do a lot of thinking- team work.

Part of a whole Example: [11K] I liked that the girls worked together they like try to get each other out and we were working pretty fine

Part of a whole – Example: Interviewer: tell me why- what did you like about it?
[9I]: Because we had to use teamwork in order to get out of the situation and be in a circle.

Part of a whole -Example: [10J] that was good. It had things about teamwork to show that you shouldn't be the only, the dictator I think. Like, um, so like work along with your friends and your classmates also.

Part of a whole – Example: And how did the girls work together? Well, not so well?
Interviewer: Were they helping each other out, communicating well?
[4D] Shakes her head yes.

Mentorship – The use of the journal responses contributed to the girls identifying the group leader as somebody that they felt connected to and who they could use as a resource to help with their life problems.
Example: [2B]I think I felt more connected with you than with the others.

Was that helpful for you?
I think so because going to journal wise, I always wanted to see what you would write, I liked having one person write in there.

Did you find the responses helpful?
Yes, it was helpful. The first entry that I made, I was having a fight with that girl. What you wrote back was very honest and that’s the way that I felt, and you just commented back and gave me your opinion. It
was very helpful to me. I think if you weren’t honest I would have ended up hurting her, and it calmed me down.

Connection – The expressive activities helped the girls to get to know one another and contributed to them feeling more comfortable and connected to the other participants.
Example Did any feelings come up for you while you were doing this? After you did it? During discussion about it in the group?
[1A] Yeah...I felt happy to do the project and happy because there are people who I trust now, in the group, that I didn’t know before.

Connection -Example: [7G] I didn’t learn nothing but I learned, I got to know other people.
[Interviewer: uh huh. So it improved relationships?]
[7G] Yeah!
Example 2: Would you say throughout the group that you made any new friendships?
[7G] Yeah.
[Interviewer: Yeah. Alright, great. So with people that you knew before or with people....]
[7G] With people that I didn’t talk to.

Connection –Example: Interviewer: it was fun, ok, did it allow you to build relationships at all? Like you and I didn’t know each other before?
[12 L]: oh yeah!
Example 2: Interviewer: well, people make judgments about everyone...in group, did you feel people knew you on a deeper level beyond the judgments?
[12 L]: yeah
Example 3: Interviewer: do you feel you got to know the girls in the group better than before?
[12 L]: yeah
[00:10:30.26] Interviewer: How about in a different way?
[12 L]: Yeah...like what they like to eat, how they are- how they act,

Connection – Example: [11K] What I learned is about the other girls that I never knew that was important to them. Like I knew about important things but I never knew that was important to them. Like my friend Melanie, she put that was important to her was food, friends, family and something else. I didn't know that was so important to her. So now I got to know what was most important to them.
11K Like I know, I'm not saying names, but 2 of the girls didn't get along, and now I see them in the hallways like having laughs with each other. And I was like, that's nice. Like, cuz they just had a little problem. This little rumor came out in the school and they were not really friends so, when they started going to the same pod they didn't want to be in the pod cuz they were there and they like hated each other. So, but then, when we started doing all of these things with the hand stuff, they were holding hands together they were laughing together. Now I see them everyday laughing together. I think it actually worked for them. Cuz they are over there having fun and stuff.

Repairing relationships: The activities helped the girls to repair broken or difficult relationships.
Example: [11K] They apologized to each other and they were like, I was like now these days you can let, you can trust nobody. They come to you and say a million things to, you can't trust them. They apologized to each other. This morning I see them laughing and taking each others numbers. I was like that's pretty cool. That you guys actually came up with a great, all these activities made a great idea for these girls to stop hating on each other for no reason. So I think this is a really good pod for girls.

Outside relationships- The girl’s indicated that the discussions and activities that occurred in group helped them to improve their relationships outside of the group.
Example: [2B] Yes, just because of the discussions we had, like my relationships have improved, like when we talked about the knots in relationships, struggles in relationships, what are the good things in relationships, stuff like that.

**Perspective taking** – The activities and the subsequent discussions facilitated the girl’s ability to learn how to take others perspectives in relationships. They indicated that this has been a helpful skill to learn in terms of how to navigate peer relationships.

Example: [2B] Yes. I think friendship-wise I have changed a lot, like, I used to get in a lot of arguments friends wise and the program, we talk about all kinds of relationships, like I’ve noticed that because of the discussions—even the ones that came from my mouth (laughs)—it was good to say it. Even if I’d thought it, to actually say it out loud, it made more sense to me. Now I understand, you just got to look at the big picture, look at it from different angles….and you can’t judge, you can’t really judge a relationship by like, it’s actions.

*So you’re saying that you can take a different perspective now.*

Yes, basically.

**Individuality and Self-Efficacy**

*Pride* – The girls’ final products made them feel proud of themselves because they set out to do something and were able to complete it.

Example: [1A] I think both the runes and the boxes—because they’re pretty.

*Pride* – Example: What would you say you are most proud of?

[7G] I don’t know. Out of everything? Making my box.

Interviewer: Yeah? What makes you proud of it?

[7G] I didn’t think that I was going to be able to do it right.

Interviewer: Hm. What do you mean? What were you afraid was going to happen?

[7G] That it would be sloppy. Yeah.

Interviewer: But it turned out that you weren’t.

[7G] That is why I took my time.

*Effort* – The girl’s final product was reflective of all of the hard work and effort that they put into creating it. Example: Interviewer: so when you look at your artwork what do you see?[12 L]: Um I see hard work

*Self-expression* – The art is a unique expression of who the girls are. It sets them apart from the other girls because they chose images/symbols/colors that meant something to them. Example: [7G] I’m neat.

Interviewer: You are neat?

[7G] Yeah, cuz I took my time to do it.

*Self-expression* – Example: [2B] It was fun because instead of just talking we actually got to do arts and crafts activities and we got to, like, got to design it the way that we wanted it, put it the way we wanted to do it. It was fun.

Example 2: I liked the hope box the most. Just making the hope box, you can make it your own way and put your own imagination into it, and like you get to design it any way you want.

*Self expression* - Example: [6F] “I think its unique.” “Nobody did the same thing.”

*Self-expression* – Example: You worked hard! Do you feel like you are reflected in any of the art?[12 L]: yeah cause I like messy...

So you like things to not look so neat and perfect…to look different, right?
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[12 L]: yup

Self-expression - Example: [11K] They love painting, they decorated their own boxes, not like you guys told us to do this, to do that, we got to do whatever we wanted on our boxes, so I thought that was cool. Example 2: [11K] I liked the fact that you guys let us go up there and pick whichever bead you want and you like you guys take the bead and put it. Cuz I think that, like the fact that girls went up there and they get to pick out their own beads, I think that was pretty cool. Cuz I used to have a pod similar to this back in Florida, but it was like nothing like this. They used to like pick out our stuff like they used to color our boxes and I felt like I felt like I wasn't like really doing nothing in that pod cuz they were doing all the work for us. They used to like, you know, like we do our boxes and stuff, we used to do over there and bracelets and things like this, similar, but they used to do it for us, they used to pick out. And I feel like when you guys let us pick our own things, I feel like we liked that and you know, and I just feel like, um, that's a good idea.

Interviewer: Like it let you be your own individual.
[11K] Uh huh. Its not like you guys are picking it for us, we are picking our own choices, what we like. So I think that was like a pretty good idea.

Self-expression: Example: [6F] I liked painting it (the Hope Box) and decorating it and putting my own edge on it- like putting your own spin on it...

Self-expression -Example: [9I]: That I got to design the box...

Interviewer: so what kind of process went into designing the box?
[9I]: I don’t know.....putting in stuff that's about me I guess

Interviewer: yeah, so what do you mean, putting in stuff that is about you. What represents you here?
[9I]: The flowers because I am cheerful..me cause of course, its about me...and then I don't really like the color pink- I like purple- but I thought the pink would go with the purples, so...

2. Has the arts contributed to a positive use of their voice?

**Theme 1: Art as facilitator**

Art as my voice – Creating art or using some form of art helps me to express my feelings. I may never do this verbally, but it provides an outlet for my expression.

Example: Did you figure out any other ways to express your feelings?
[ 4D] Listen to music.

Art as my voice – Example: Interviewer: Good. Ok. And you in terms of dealing with your emotions or things that upset you, what do you think about the pod and some of the activities that we did. Do you think that any of those activities kind of helped you with being able to express your feelings or learning how to express them?

[11K] Yeah, actually the activity that motivates me to express my feelings is like the box. Remember I told you that? Cuz when I think yellow/black I think I should do this better or I shouldn't do this or that. So I think that activity was the main one that got me to express myself a little bit more.

Art as my voice – Example: Interviewer: do you think writing about in your journal was helpful to get it out?
[12 L]: Kind of

Interviewer: sometimes for me writing in a journal is getting it out and get that release. Did that help?
Art as my voice – Example: [2B] I think looking at it, in this picture, just the way the colors are, like they are, I’m not going to say they are dark colors, I’m not like this gothic kind of person (laughs) but gold and silver are kind of like, my colors. And for me, mixing them together and seeing that dark color like, I think it represents my mood and my feelings because usually my feelings are just black, cause usually I’m just in a bad mood, but going through this, at the end, I decided to change the box colors. I think I’ve grown from, let’s say black to like gray. Cause I’m not the way I used to be before. And I’ve changed a lot.

Art as my voice – Example: Interviewer: what are you most proud of when you look at box I think the way that I didn't do like the other people, I just did my own way.
Interviewer: yeah, so you were thinking independently in that way
[6F]: yeah

Art as my voice – Example: You worked hard! Do you feel like you are reflected in any of the art?
[12 L]: yeah cause I like messy...

Art as my voice – Example: Interviewer: what did you think when the other girls asked you to do theirs?
[8H]: I was happy because I can do something that no one else thought of

Art as my voice – Example: [11K] Black I chose cuz sometimes I have anger inside so its like I see blackness inside of me and then I chose yellow as like the bright side of me. Sometimes I have ideas and like a good person. So I chose those to colors cuz like black to me is like when I have anger and I sometimes I do stuff that I wish I went back and never did. And then I chose yellow cuz yellow is like a bright side of me that I'm a good person even though I do things that I should not be doing. I think that I'm a good person, so I chose those two colors.
Example 2: [11K] I liked the fact that you guys let us go up there and pick whichever bead you want and you like you guys take the bead and put it. Cuz I think that, like the fact that girls went up there and they get to pick out their own beads, I think that was pretty cool. Cuz I used to have a pod similar to this back in Florida, but it was like nothing like this. They used to like pick out our stuff like they used to color our boxes and I felt like I felt like I wasn't like really doing nothing in that pod cuz they were doing all the work for us. They used to like, you know, like we do our boxes and stuff, we used to do over there and bracelets and things like this, similar, but they used to do it for us, they used to pick out. And I feel like when you guys let us pick our own things, I feel like we liked that and you know, and I just feel like, um, that's a good idea.
Interviewer: Like it let you be your own individual. 11K Uh huh. Its not like you guys are picking it for us, we are picking our own choices, what we like. So I think that was like a pretty good idea.
Art as my voice - Example: [2B] I liked the hope box the most. Just making the hope box, you can make it your own way and put your own imagination into it, and like you get to design it any way you want. It expressed my feelings and my moods and I think that’s the good thing about it.

Art as my voice – Example: what did you like about it?
[9I]: That I got to design the box...

Facilitating - The art helped the girls to talk about and deal with difficult topics. These art projects worked because they were able to distract themselves by looking down at their project and working on it while talking or because they could actually act out or design something that helped to express their feelings.
Example: DO you think its hard to talk about relationships sometimes?
[12 L]: yeah
Interviewer: Do you think it was good to use another way...a healthy way to talk about it?
[12 L]: Yeah
Interviewer: How about the human knot? What did you think of that?

Facilitating - Using the arts and being in a safe space allowed the girls an opportunity to open up to each other.
Example: [1A] It was really fun and good because you can express your feelings and its only girls. No boys, that was good.

Facilitating -Example: [2B] Well, I liked it overall. It was great that we had this program, I think it was really cool. We just get to be open with people. I thought it was kind of cool to just be open. Not to hurt anyone’s feelings, but much better than RALLY. Especially relationship wise, you can’t say anything to them without them saying “we need to call DSS” but with you guys it was like, we can just talk about all of our problems, it’s not like you guys are going to call social services if we talked about hard stuff.

Facilitating - Example: [9I] but I did notice that they did speak out their mind a lot in the program.
Interviewer: yeah, did you speak your mind?
[9I]: Yes!
Interviewer: is it easier to speak you mind in a safe place, like a group?
[9I]: yeah

Facilitating – Example: so like we talked about before doing art while talking about things that are hard to talk re, was it helpful in being more open, receptive...or more comfortable talking about these things?
[6F] yeah because you could express yourself through the art and be more accountable...express it better

Facilitating –Example: Interviewer: do you think that when we had discussions about things that were sensitive or about boys & relationships that having the HB to work on while talking made it...
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[8H]: better... because you didn't have to focus on that- you didn't have to just sit there and focus on that (the conversation) and if there's something you want to talk about...

Interviewer: do you think you have changed or grown in any way because of art projects?...its kind of a tough Q but it was something that....
[8H]: It helped you get more open and stuff...

Facilitating –Example: Interviewer: did you like doing the HB and then the hi/lows during check in while we were working on the HB? Do you think it was easier to talk while doing the box rather than stare at each other?
[12 L]: yea how come?
[12 L]: b/c it would just be boring...we would be bored if we were just sitting there...and people liked the group
Example 2: Interviewer: What do you think of what they did- like remember how they were acting out a knot in a relationship? Do you think t was a different way to talk about it- acting it out was more fun way to explore relationships?
[12 L]: Yeah
Interviewer: DO you think its hard to talk about relationships sometimes?
[12 L]: yeah
[00:06:42.24] Interviewer: Do you think it was good to use another way...a healthy way to talk about it?
[12 L]: Yeah

Facilitating -Example: [9I]: yeah- it kind of distracts you...like for example, a lot of people aren't really comfortable talking about their personal lives but when you are doing an activity you feel ok I guess and it kind of distracts you and you are actually talking about things...that's what I thin

Theme 2: Anger management

Anger management – The girls indicate that some of the expressive activities have helped them to learn how to deal with their anger. Rather than screaming, hitting, or “girl fighting” they can use their words, use calming/coping skills first, and communication skills.
Example: Interviewer: No, ok. Do you feel like you've changed at all in your thinking or your behavior from before you started the pod to now?
[10J] Yeah, because before like I said, my anger, like before I would just like, like I said I would just do some things, but now I try to keep my cool, I try to do like the advice that everyone put in. I try to do those things, cuz I don't like drama and all that stuff.
[10J] Yeah, like they said some, like advice, like I said before, advice. Like, to keep your cool. So like count to ten, say your name and all that stuff. Its like, what, I changed the way I did that. Usually I'd just get mad, but now I like, I have to be alone sometimes. Or like I take out my anger sometimes on things, like I punch something I guess. But, yeah, I guess I changed in like controlling my anger more when I get mad.

Anger management – Example: has SL been helpful to you in learning to manage stress?
[8H]: Yeah like you don't have to hit things like you can look at this and be reminded that you have faith and stuff like that.
Yeah like one of the nice things about the runes is u can actually touch it...calm ourselves down instead of acting out on our anger, right?

[8H]: yeah.

Interviewer: so when we met a few weeks ago you said when you are upset you express your feelings by...talking about it, yelling and crying...do you think that anything has changed?

[8H]: when I get mad at other people, instead I can use this (the rune) I can touch instead of yelling and screaming

Interviewer: Anything the girls said that could handle anger?

[8H]: Yeah, count to 10

Interviewer: mentioned that most boys and girls handle conflict by fighting with fists...girls can sit down and talk before physically fighting...but boys just fight...do u feel like you learned anything new re the ways the other girls handle girl fighting?

[8H]: they can sit down and talk about it

Interviewer: so is that a good alternative?

[8H]: yeah, instead of fighting you can sit down and talk re it

Anger management –Example: [1A] Yes…I calmed my anger down a lot.

Anger management – Example: [2B] So I decided to make the hope box and the things in there (points to the handout – runes that symbolize “anger”), um, cause I think it could help me improve the way that I act and the way I am, and um, I think that that could actually help me figure out what are my struggles in life. The little clay things, I chose anger, because sometimes anger is my weakness and um like I get so angry, I go berserk everywhere, I just can’t hold it. I thought it was good to pick that anger piece because anger is what I have trouble with the most.

Example: [2B]Like say if you got into an argument or something with one of your friends, how would you solve it basically. You could do it the good way instead of the bad way. Going up to that person and talking to them about that problem, like, you’re not confronting that person, but you are being a nice person, asking them what’s their problem, or if there’s any way you could make it better.

Example 2: [2B]Yes, it was helpful. The first entry that I made, I was having a fight with that girl. What you wrote back was very honest and that’s the way that I felt, and you just commented back and gave me your opinion. It was very helpful to me. I think if you weren’t honest I would have ended up hurting her, and it calmed me down.

Theme 3: My strong voice outside of group

Generalization – The things that the girls learned through expressive activities have helped in their day-to-day life outside of the group. They have learned to use their voice in a positive way.

Example: [10J] Yeah, like they said some, like advice, like I said before, advice. Like, to keep your cool. So like count to ten, say your name and all that stuff. Its like, what, I changed the way I did that. Usually I’d just get mad, but now I like, I have to be alone sometimes. Or like I take out my anger sometimes on things, like I punch something I guess. But, yeah, I guess I changed in like controlling my anger more when I get mad.
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**Generalization** – Example: Interviewer: do you think your experience in the group has changed or impacted your relationship outside the group at all? Maybe your sister- how think or feel about them?

[6F]: yeah, I've been nicer to her now

**Generalization** – Example: Interviewer: difference between thinking/feeling before and after program?

[8H]: I learned how to be a little more open...if you don't know somebody you can get to know them

Interviewer: So, when you think about if this program has impacted you day to day, what do you think?

[8H]: Um, maybe the way you think re your relationships, or deal with stress. I think the different activities...help you think different things...like help you think

Regarding your point of view, but also theirs as well so in thinking about being shy, do you think the program has helped you all in this?

[8H]: Yeah, like being open a little more and to do things I never gave a chance

**Generalization** - Example: [11K]Well I know we had our little conversation in class, in pod, about girls and boys. That really reminded me of bad things that happened to me with relationships with guys. I know that now these days, its normal that little girls in middle school are already dating. I think that for me I should wait to high school cuz really middle school, already in this school when you go out with somebody its like drama. Words everywhere like we hear stuff everywhere, so like, its not really good. I don't think that going out with guys in school is really good so. I went out with 2 already in school and if I have to go back I would regret going out with them, even though one of them was as good person. But I would actually regret it cuz I don't know, I would just regret it, and I have this thing, like right now I'm feeling like anger towards them cuz I heard some stuff about them but I don't want, even though one of them actually told me the truth about what happened and I'm feeling like really mad at them, but you don't see me going out there like I'm going to beat you up or stuff, I still talk to them but not, I don't trust them like I used to, we make things worse together again, like I don't talk to them or trust them like I used to like a best friend and stuff, so yeah

Example 2: [11K] Yeah, I chose those 2 colors to remind myself like, why would I do stuff bad when there is going to come consequences and the consequences could be hard. Like last time I was walking to Jackson and this guy came up to me and said lets go steal. And I was like really thinking about. I could get in big trouble and I could be in jail right now for stealing. So that made me, like I was thinking back then when I made that box, I shouldn't be doing things that are bad. I was like, that's why I put down the color yellow, I was thinking the bright side, and I was like no, I'm not going to do that, I was like no you guys go and do it, if you guys want to get in trouble, do it, so that's why I chose those 2 colors and did my box like that.

**Generalization** – Example: [1A] Yes it did. If you’re stressed out you can count numbers in your head and doing the runes thing, and hold them in your hand to help you think about other stuff and calm down.

Interviewer: When you are upset, how do you typically express your feelings, if at all?

At times I scream and cry…when I get angry I do stuff I shouldn’t do, I've stopped that now. That’s gotten a little better.
Generalization – Example: [2B] Yes because I mean, there are troubles in my relationships, especially, you know, boyfriend and girlfriend wise, and how … you know the stuff that we talked about? I think that keeping all of that stuff in my head, I think like, talking to my boyfriend about all that stuff, it’s helped our relationship. And family-wise, you know, stuff that goes around in your family, and we talked about it, like I took it all into consideration and actually talked to my parents and family about it and I would say that some things have actually gotten better in my household.

Example: Good. So has this pod changed or impacted your relationships outside the group? Um, yes. Um, I don’t know how to explain it but the program has helped me with relationships outside. Like what you guys tell us, and what we talk about in the group, like you guys may say comments, and it really helped me as an individual to look at relationships from different angles and see what I can do to make it better.

Generalization:: Example: [10J] Yeah, I guess I talk to more people about it. Especially my friends. Like I already talk to them mostly about it because there are some things that I would have kept away from them, but now I tell them.

Organizing – Using art activities helped the girls to organize their thoughts more clearly so that they could speak their mind without forgetting things. This also helped them to calm themselves down and to gain perspective before they got upset and said things that they wished they hadn’t said.

Example: [6F]: yeah like I feel like I have to think about it before I say
Interviewer: do you think its helpful to write re it first like in the journals?
[6F]: yeah cause you can have cause I forget things easily so if I say something, "I'm going to say this to this person or whatever" and they say something else and I say it wrongly, there could be a misunderstanding.
Interviewer: so it helpful to organize your thoughts first? So you know what you want to say? [6F]: yeah
Interviewer: we kind of practiced that with the journals right?
[6F]: yeah

Organizing – Example:[9I] I have a journal but I just write it out- what I have to say- to my journal

3. Do the girls prefer one expressive strategy over others?

Painting – The girls indicated that they really liked the creativity and originality involved in the painting activities.

Example: I liked the hope box the most. Just making the hope box, you can make it your own way and put your own imagination into it, and like you get to design it any way you want. It expressed my feelings and my moods and I think that’s the good thing about it.
Painting – The girls indicated that they really liked the creativity and originality involved in the painting activities. They also indicated that it was a relaxing process.

Example: The box. What did you like about the box? 7g painting it. Interviewer: Ok, alright. Um, so, when you painted it, when you were painting it during group, was there anything about the painting that you really liked doing or was it just.... 7g It was fun.

Painting – The girls indicated that they really liked the creativity and originality involved in the painting activities. They also indicated that it was a relaxing process.

Example: I liked painting it (the Hope Box) and decorating it and putting my own edge on it- like putting your own spin on it. So out of a 1-10 how much did you like doing the hope box?
I liked it a 10...

Writing response – The girls appreciated being responded to in their journals and also enjoyed the process of writing.

Example: I did like it, cause at the end of the POD, you guys would ask some personal questions and some random questions to see what people are thinking about in their heads and what they are going through. Writing it in a journal can take it off their mind. It’s better to express it in a journal than hold it in and holding grudges in their mind.

Writing response – The girls appreciated being responded to in their journals and also enjoyed the process of writing.

Example: Ok. One thing I didn't ask you was what you thought of the journaling?
7g Um, it was good.
Interviewer: Yeah, what was good about it?
7g Um, we got to write to you and y'all wrote back.
Interviewer: And so did you like the actual writing part at the end?
7g Yeah.

Food – The girls enjoyed the nourishment provided and the creativity involved in constructing their own snacks.

Example: Interviewer: Let's think about them...we did the HB...what else...the human knot, the role playing, we're going to do the bracelets today, the runes, hamburgers, sushi (b/c you said you liked sushi, remember?)
Which was your favorite?
[12 L]: Making the hamburgers.. it was fun and good.

Experiential – The girls preferred expressive strategies that actually “showed” or helped them to “feel” something. They had a visual representation of the topic but were also using movement with their bodies to show that.

Example: I liked the human knot.
Interviewer: tell me why- what did you like about it?
[91]: because we had to use teamwork in order to get out of the situation and be in a circle.
Experiential – The girls preferred expressive strategies that actually “showed” or helped them to “feel” something. They had a visual representation of the topic but were also using movement with their bodies to show that.

Example: Interviewer: Cool. And so out of all the activities that we did in the pod, what did you like the most and what did you like the least?

11K The most, I liked the knot. The hands

Experiential – The girls preferred expressive strategies that actually “showed” or helped them to “feel” something. They had a visual representation of the topic but were also using movement with their bodies to show that.

Example: the knot- I liked that- doing that shows how hard it is... you could experience the knotty relationship...

Experiential – The girls preferred expressive strategies that actually “showed” or helped them to “feel” something. They had a visual representation of the topic but were also using movement with their bodies to show that.

Example: So out of all the things that we did in the pod, what was your favorite thing?
4D The knot thing.
You liked to do it. What did you like about it?

4D It was a challenge.

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.

Example: liked beads, knot, hope box painting, discussion about sex and boys

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.

Example: Let's see. I don't know, they were like all the same. They were fun. Like I had fun time with every one of them.

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.

Example: says that all activities were fun (making food, painting, runes, and knot.)

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.

Example: Interviewer: would you keep or change parts of the group? If you did this group again, what parts should we keep?
[8H]: the box, the runes, the food the music the different activities...human knot

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.

Example: Interviewer: what activity did you like the least?
[12 L]: Um, none of them. I liked all of them.
Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: 7g I liked it. It was fun. We did a lot of activities.

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: (Reports liking music, food, hope box, human knot)

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: says that all activities were fun (making food, painting, runes, and knot.)

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: (Reports liking music, food, hope box, human knot)

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: says that all activities were fun (making food, painting, runes, and knot.)

Variety – The girls noted that they like a variety of activities.
Example: I thought it was interesting, because I learned how to do those signs (runes) and I know what they mean now.
What activities have you enjoyed the most? What did you like about it?
I liked the eating and good snacks! I also liked doing the boxes, especially painting them. I liked that human knot, I liked that thingy.

4.) Do the girls report any negative experiences in Strong Links?

Theme #1: Writing is “school like”: Boring and hard

“School like” – The girls reported that the journaling felt too much like school.
Example: Me too! Ok, so then how about journaling? Was that the one you were...
[9I]: Yeah- at the end, we always had to write- in class, too, that annoys me.

“School like” – Example: [11K] Like, I felt like I didn't really want to write, but some of the topics that you guys actually made us write about was interesting. Like, what was the purpose of us choosing the pod. I think that was a really good one even though we were like tired, we don't want to write, we just want to have fun, we've been writing the whole day in school, but I like the fact that you guys came up with really good ideas and really good stuff to write about so girls got, even though they really didn't like writing, they got into the things that you wrote in the journals for us to write about. So yeah....
“School like” – Example:[4D] It was boring. (Laughs). You were NOT into the journaling, huh. Ok. So, if we had to change that, should we take it out. (She nods yes) So you are not cool with that. What about the messages that Amanda wrote back to you? Was that ok, you were like whatever...?

Writing – Writing is boring.
Example: [10J] The only thing, like I said before, I don't like writing. Interviewer: Oh right! The journals I didn't even bring that up. I could definitely tell that you didn't like the journals. [10J] I didn't like those. Interviewer: Because you just don't like writing. 10J I don't like writing. Its just boring.

Writing as challenging – The girls indicated that the journal topics were too challenging. They felt that they didn’t know what to say, so therefore, they did not enjoy this process.
Example- Interviewer: if you were to rate from a 1-10?
[8H]: like a 5, because some of them I didn't understand and some of them I didn't write as much.
Interviewer: b/c you felt like you didn't want to or maybe you not feel comfortable?
[8H]: I didn't know what to say
Interviewer: things you didn't like? You can be completely honest, its ok.
[8H]: the journal- like easier topics

Theme #2: Chaotic Group Environment

Chaos – At times group members would have preferred a more contained, disciplined environment.
Example: 6F]: Not let them go crazy like that...
Interviewer: so it felt chaotic at times
[6F]: yeah

Chaos – Example: [10J] Like when the girls would talk over you guys would like just stay there, just stand there, and just be like, guys, please and then like I would help you or Kendra ...
Interviewer: Yes you did...absolutely!
[10J] Like I guess, like, speak up more, when you need, Excuse me can I please have your attention and if they wouldn't listen to you then I guess you should try some other things. Interviewer: So being more forceful.

Chaos –Example: [11K] That was pretty good too, to be honest with you. Uh, I wanted to do, that was a good idea that we all put our hands together but we should have done our own hands separate, and then like pass it around to each other and put our names to see what we wrote in our own hands. Like do our own hands and then like pass it around to each other. I think we should do it that way... [00:02:14.05] Interviewer: Oh, so I get it. So instead of putting it in the middle, so one at a time, because maybe that was too chaotic. [11K] Yup.

Theme 3: Student-Facilitator Disconnect
Disconnect – The girls would have liked the leaders to be more open about who they are and the struggles that they have had. This contributed to them not feeling very connected.

Example: [2B] Because I’m not saying you guys could have been a little more open with us, but like struggles that we talked about, maybe you guys could have said, “oh, we related to it” and stuff like that.

So you would have liked us to share more of our personal experiences, and what we’ve been through?

(laughs) My big moment! Uh, like I said before, you all should be a little more open with us.

Disconnect – The girls would have liked the leaders to be more open about who they are and the struggles that they have had. This contributed to them not feeling very connected.

Example: [1A] Like if you had shared things from your life I think that would have been a lot better. Like to hear what you guys did if you were going through some struggles or some hard times.

Example: [1A] Don’t take this the wrong way, but no because you all didn’t say nothing of your life. But yeah you all was supportive, we could talk about any kind of stuff we wanted
Appendix F
A Selection of the Girl’s Projects
Love heals people - the ones who receive it. Whatever you are, you are. Love yourself and others. Take care of yourself.

GUILT

For those who seek to heal situations from the past - for what was done or for what was not done. You can help yourself heal by consulting with someone who has gone through the same thing. Through this process you will find that you can change. Healing is possible.

Anger

Anger at injustice can be a powerful tool. It can help you to break old patterns of behavior. This rune signals a new way of looking at yourself. It can help you to reclaim your power and your energy. The anger you feel is a natural part of the healing process.
LOVE

Love heals people - the ones who give it and the ones who receive it. Whether they are challenging you, or awaiting resolution, this Rune invites you to share your love and let it heal.

FAITH

The Rune of Faith presents an opportunity to dedicate your life to a larger purpose. This is the time to believe that we can make a difference. First, believe in yourself. And then, in the words of Gandhi, “we must be the change we wish to see in the world.”

TRUST

This Rune urges you to have faith and to know that when you face the issue of trust, you are being asked to grow into new feelings. Do you grow and Trust will grow in you. So, persist in this process, for both are uniquely yours, and as individual as fingers are different.

ANGER

ANGER

LOVE

TRUST
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