Building Resilience in the Stronglinks Program:
Exploring experiences of stress, coping, and resilience for Latina adolescents in a school-based program

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ABSTRACT

Using a Participant Action Research model, this study explores the experiences of stress, coping, and resilience in a group of Latina adolescent girls participating in Stronglinks, a strengths-focused, school-based girls program. This project aims to understand how girls defined and understood the constructs of stress and coping, ways they coped with stress, and whether aspects of the Stronglinks program they experienced as helpful were associated with factors and/or systems implicated in resilience development. Both qualitative interview data from pre- and post-Stronglinks participation and scores from a coping checklist were used to explore the girls’ experiences. Findings suggest that different types of relationships, including friendships, family relationships, and relationships with boys, were particularly stressful for girls. However, girls in this group also sought support from these very relationships as a primary coping strategy. Other coping strategies included distraction, emotional expression, and daydreaming. Relationship building with both peers and with adult leaders, learning new coping skills, improving self-esteem, and increasing self-knowledge were aspects of the Stronglinks program experienced as most helpful by participants. Ways these identified factors are aligned with resilience development, particularly in the context of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model are discussed. In conclusion, implications of this project from a relational-cultural and ecological framework are explored and directions for future research are identified.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This chapter will review the constructs of stress, coping, and resilience, and ways these constructs have been traditionally defined and also applied to urban adolescent girls. Problems with applying deficit models of mental illness, and the need for using developmental theories that emphasize strengths will be discussed in the context of this population. This project seeks to use feminist theory to guide inquiry with groups who has traditionally been silenced and devalued. The rationale for this dissertation study, as well as the research questions it seeks to answer, will also be presented within this chapter.

Background of the Problem

Stress and Urban Adolescents

Stress has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as the perception that one’s resources have been overwhelmed by external demands. Adolescents living in low-income neighborhoods in urban America are exposed daily to a variety of intense external demands. Life for the poor in urban areas is associated with tremendous stressors: inadequate housing, poverty, high rates of drug and alcohol use, and community violence (Horowitz, McKay, & Marshall, 2005; Leadbeater, 2007).

Kiser (2007) states that “there is mounting evidence that growing up in low-income, urban environments exposes children to severe and ongoing trauma” (p 211). Because these stressors are chronic, urban adolescents may persistently feel unsafe, anxious, or not control of their environments. Compounded community trauma, this pattern of exposure to multiple traumatic events in the home and community throughout a child’s development, is known to
have dire mental health consequences for adolescents (Horowitz, McKay, & Marshall, 2005). These consequences include: meeting diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, viewing the world as a threatening place, lacking confidence in their abilities to handle challenges, and experiencing the effects of a dysregulated nervous system (Kiser, 2007). An extensive body of research has clearly established stressful experiences as risk factors for psychological symptoms in children and adolescents with myriad negative outcomes (e.g., Duncan & Yeung, 1995; Grant et al, 2000). Yet the youth impacted by these tremendous stressors are noticeably silent in most investigations on this topic. It is loudly communicated to consumers of media and psychological literature that urban children are damaged by stress in their worlds, but how they personally understand and experience these stressors is less clear.

Race, culture, and ethnicity are significant to any discussion of stress in urban America, as people of color are considerably overrepresented in low-income urban neighborhoods. For the purposes of this study, only African-American and Latino adolescents will be considered, although the diversity of urban America is certainly not limited to these two groups.

Compared to their European-American counterparts, poverty rates are two and a half times greater for African-American adolescents. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reports that approximately 31% of African-American children and adolescents live in poverty; as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the poverty threshold for a family of four with three children is $20,516 annually, or $1709 monthly. Statistics are similar for Latino youth, with approximately 28% of children and adolescents living below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Both African-American and Latino youth are more likely to experience persistent poverty than European-American youth, who are more likely to experience transient poverty (Lyons et al, 2006). Chronic poverty is strongly associated with a number of the stressors and negative
outcomes described earlier. For example, Grant et al. (2005) found a strong correlation between poverty level and externalizing behaviors in a sample of African-American urban adolescents.

There is also a pervasive achievement gap between adolescents of diverse cultural backgrounds and their mainstream peers. Taylor et al. (2007) discuss several factors that may contribute to this discrepancy. For instance, many of African-American and Latino students come from homes where standard American English is not the primary language, placing them at a disadvantage for tasks involving both expressive and receptive language. Additionally, students from diverse backgrounds may be experiencing a cultural mismatch with their teachers and counselors, who tend to be White, middle-class, and monolingual English speakers.

Gender also appears to be a critical variable in experiences of stress. For girls, this stress may be exacerbated by the fact that, as they get older, girls experience a significant and long-lasting decline in self-esteem. A study by the American Association of University Women (1994) found a pronounced gap between boys and girls on several measures of self-esteem; the sharpest drop in girls’ self-esteem came in the year between elementary and middle school. This finding is significant for a number of reasons, including the fact that self-esteem seems to be related to adolescents’ career ambitions and dreams. Girls may find it more difficult to fantasize about a dream job, and may lower their career hopes and expectations; girls were more likely to say they are not “smart enough” or “good enough” to make their career dreams come true (AAUW, 1994, p. 9). Two interesting interactions between race and self-esteem in girls also emerged from the AAUW (1994) study. African-American girls express high levels of self-esteem, which seems to be fostered by a sense of personal importance maintained by family and community. However, these same girls demonstrated a decline in positive feelings surrounding their teachers and schoolwork. Latina girls, conversely, experience the greatest drop of self-
esteem between elementary and high school than any other group, although they start with the highest levels on many items (AAUW, 1994).

Managing Stress

Stress, from multiple sources, is an ever-present factor in the lives of urban adolescent girls and is an unavoidable reality. Ways in which this stress is understood and managed is broadly conceptualized as coping. Coping is a complex concept, one that incorporates aspects of emotion, behavior, cognition, development, and environment. Further, coping seems to be an interactional process, dependant on both the individual and the nature of the stressor. Literature on coping and adolescents is broad, and often aims to identify behaviors that comprise specific coping styles. There appear to be some differences in ways that minority adolescents cope with stressors as compared to their majority-group counterparts. One study, for example, found that Mexican-American and youth used their relatives and their religion as sources of support for coping (Munsch & Wampler, 1993). Such differences in coping styles may be reflective of cultural norms and values, such as the fact that Mexican-American adolescents tend to be more family-centered than their peers (Kobus & Reyes, 2000). Gender differences in coping also seem to exist as well. Girls appear to use strategies such as seeking support from friends, engaging in wishful thinking, or simply accepting the problem, more than their male peers (e.g., Feldman et al., 1995).

An array of alarming statistics indicate that girls living in low-income urban areas, are not successfully managing these demands well, placing them “at risk” for a number of negative outcomes. For example, a report by the Girls Coalition of Boston (2005) cites the following grim trends: a tripling of the arrest rates for girls in Massachusetts; a sharp increase of the number of African-American girls involved in the Juvenile Justice system and the Department of
Youth Services; and an increase in the number of female juvenile delinquents in the state. These figures are troubling, and it is easy to locate similar statistics that paint a dark picture of urban youth. However, it is important to note that these statistics do not tell the complete story, and highlight the deficits of adolescent girls rather than their strengths. Urban girls have a tremendous number of strengths that these types of statistics alone fail to adequately capture.

**Difference as Deficit: The Need for New Models of Development**

The deficit model of mental illness, in which deviations from normal development are conceptualized as personal weaknesses, is clearly not an ideal framework to apply to urban girls. The assumptions underlying this deficient model are based on a concept of “normality” derived from dominant, male cultural values like autonomy and independence (Lerner et al., 2007). Applying this “difference as deficit” model to urban girls inherently ignores or devalues their strengths and attributes (Lerner et al., 2007, p19). To counter this antiquated perspective of adolescent development, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model has emerged as a way to focus on strengths, especially in diverse populations. The basic premise of this approach is that youth should be considered as valuable resources that can be developed, rather than problems or liabilities that must be controlled or managed (Lerner et al., 2007). In one mixed-methodology study of PYD and its applications to urban girls, Lerner et al. (2007) found that urban girls strongly exhibit measures PYD on quantitative measures; in other words, urban girls in this sample appear to be experiencing healthy development based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. When defined in terms of strengths rather than deficit, urban girls are quite successful, and are even thriving (Lerner et al, 2007).

PYD is innovative in that it posits a flexible model of development in which opportunities that foster a set of strengths in adolescents directly impact positive development.
In PYD, there is always potential for change and growth and always a room to provide opportunities for youth to develop these strengths. The “5 C’s” of PYD refer to the strengths that are related to healthy development: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. Adolescents whose lives contain these “5 C’s” are thought to later progress down a developmental path towards a sixth “C:” Contribution, to self, family, and community. Lerner et al (2005) explains:

In sum, the theory of PYD that has emerged in the adolescent developmental literature specifies that if young people have mutually beneficial relations with the people and institutions of their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society. Young people will thrive (p.12).

From this perspective, even adolescents from environments lacking in resources or supports may still experience healthy development. PYD offers a model that provides insight into how some children facing adversity can appear resilient.

**Resilience and Urban Adolescent Girls**

The concept of resilience is integral to the discussion of strengths and urban girls. Shaffer et al. (2007) define resilience as “the general phenomenon of doing well despite exposure to significant threats to development” (p.54) and note that it is not a static concept. Crucial to their conceptualization of resilience are concepts of competence and adversity; in this study, these ambiguous constructs are defined along multiple domains, and relate respectively to adequate adaptive behaviors and challenges faced (Shaffer et al., 2007). These concepts are very complex, and depend largely on a given individual’s perception of competence and adversity. Unsurprisingly, Shaffer et al. (2007) found no one clear answer to what makes a girl resilient.
Rather, the authors concluded that there are multiple paths to resilience that vary based on the individual and her circumstances; this finding suggests that, in terms of intervention, there is no “magic bullet” approach that will foster resilience (Shaffer et al, 2007). Rather, different types of interventions can be used to foster resilience for different girls.

Psychological literature on resilience is abundant. In the past fifteen years, it has been a popular topic, particularly as it applies to development. Shaffer et al. (2007), described above, provides one example of the complexities that resilience researchers encounter when examining this construct. Attempting to consider diverse variables such as context, individual differences, genetics, and family experience to name only a few make the task of understanding resilience in any meaningful way a seemingly impossible one. The goal of this line of research is an important one; if the factors implicated in resilience are clearly understood, powerful interventions for building resilience can be created. However, as an increasing number of variables are implicated in resilience, the models of this construct become more complex and abstract, obscuring potential for application.

Some models have approached resilience from a critical perspective, emphasizing the influence of cultural factors. Conceptualizing resilience based specifically on race or ethnicity is an important direction for this body of research, especially as it applies to urban girls of color. For example, Ward (2007) explores the concept of resistance in promoting strengths in African-American girls and women. Broadly, resistance describes the refusal of African-American women to accept a victim ideology; as a result, a critical perspective on the world develops, allowing the girl to develop a healthy and adaptive resistance to oppression. This resistance can, in turn, “affirm and support that their belief in themselves is greater than anyone’s disbelief” (Ward, 2007, p.246). Parents can communicate this to their girls by having conversations about
racial realities, to help them develop a critical racial consciousness. While Ward (2007) does not equate the concepts of resilience and resistance, they are related in that resistance is a way in which African-American girls successfully manage their stressful environments and build strengths.

A promising way to foster resilience and strengths in urban girls is through mentorship and providing opportunities for positive adult relationships. Rhodes et al. (2007) explore mentorship with urban girls. Defined as a close interpersonal relationship between an adolescent and a non-parent adult, such relationships appear to be significant factors in resilience development for youth. Research has demonstrated some positive outcomes for adolescents who are involved mentors, such as engaging in fewer problem behaviors, improved perceptions of parental relationships, and endorsement of more positive attitudes towards school (Rhodes et al., 2007). Female mentors appear to have an especially positive influence on the psychological development of adolescent girls. It is theorized that these non-parent female mentors can help girls navigate the difficult transition between childhood and adulthood, particularly in regard to negotiating independence (Rhodes et al., 2007). Natural mentors often exist within the extended, intergenerational family structures of African-American and Latino families; aunts, cousins, grandmothers, sisters, and godmothers can all act as natural female mentors for girls. While mentorship has the potential to encourage strengths and build healthy development for girls, research indicates that formal mentors (e.g., Big Sister, school counselor) do not seem to be as influential as naturally occurring ones. In addition, some girls reported that mentors of different cultural backgrounds than their own were “out of touch with their experiences and problems” (Rhodes et al., 2007, p. 151). Adults working as mentors in urban communities must work hard to overcome these social and cultural differences by increasing knowledge of the urban
community, understanding cultural norms, and building awareness of the constraints in a given setting. An understanding of the stressors faced by urban girls is an integral component of improving the success of adult mentors in these settings.

**Theoretical Foundations**

*An Ecological Approach*

It is important to recognize that urban adolescents reside in the intersection of numerous interacting systems, which include school, home, and neighborhood. Gaining comprehensive insight into the world of the urban adolescent is difficult without an understanding of how these diverse systems interact and impact the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1979) was one of the first theorists to recognize the importance of these interacting systems. His approach, now known as the Ecological Model or Ecological Systems Theory, posits that individual development is embedded in, and influenced by, the interaction of multiple systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described several distinct, interacting systems: the microsystem, which comprises the systems closest to the individual (e.g., family, school); the mesosystem, which is the interaction between various microsystems (e.g., relationship between school and family); the exosystem, comprised of systems that have an influence on the individual, but in which the individual is not directly involved (e.g., a spouse’s job); and the macrosystem, which involves the larger social or cultural context (e.g., living in a democratic society). To understand an individual, it is imperative to understand the systems of which they are a part, and which influence them.

Other theorists have incorporated gender, race, ethnicity, and culture more specifically into ecological theory (e.g., Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002). Ballou and colleagues (2002) emphasize multiple levels of interaction in their feminist ecological model, applying a systems perspective to the ways in which mainstream normative values can contribute to injustice and
social oppression. In this model, it is recognized that systems have multiple, interacting dimensions. Coordinates of race, age, gender, and class are included, indicating the significance of these factors as they interact with each dimension and system. Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner (2002) discuss school curriculum development as a real-world example of ways that different dimensions and systems interact that is relevant to this project. The authors note that material included in school curricula and how students are tested on this material is based on mainstream, dominant cultural values. The existence of alternative cultural values and other ways of knowing, such as through intuitive knowledge, are discounted (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002).

Relational-Cultural Theory and Applications to Feminist Therapy

Additional feminist theories provide important theoretical foundations for this project and complement the ecological focus of this project. Feminist theory recognizes that the unfair distribution of societal power is a pivotal factor in the psychological development of many individuals, particularly women and cultural minorities. Social power, or lack thereof, plays a tremendous role in how people view themselves and their worlds, determine their own agency, and construe their sense of justice and fairness. In the feminist worldview, focus is placed on understanding the very complex ways that institutions and societies maintain this power imbalance (Gilligan, 1982). There are also important considerations given to relationships in the feminist worldview. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Jean Baker Miller (1986) were both early proponents of the construct of “self-in-relation.” Development, as it is understood by these theorists, happens within the context of interdependent and mutually respectful relationships. Self-in-relation is a concept that stresses interdependence and connection as key factors in
healthy development and growth. In this way, feminist theory directly counters the focus on independence and autonomy stressed by other theories of psychotherapy (Miller, 1986).

The relationship, then, is at the core of feminist psychotherapy. Feminist therapists emphasize a collaborative, egalitarian clinical relationship, rather than a more traditional doctor-patient one; the intent of this partnership is to share the power in the therapeutic relationship. Feminist therapy aims to develop a feminist consciousness, defined as the awareness that one’s own suffering arises not from individual deficits but rather from the ways in which one has been systemically invalidated, excluded, and silenced because of one’s status as a member of a nondominant group in the culture (Brown, 2004, p 464).

This type of therapy aims to move past the healing relationship, and engender change for clients on a broader level (Brown, 2004). Feminist theory does not use a deficiency model of mental illness, instead viewing pathology as a consequence of living in a society where one is chronically marginalized, silenced, and devalued. In addition to developing this feminist consciousness, general goals of feminist therapy are to empower the client and to focus on existing strengths.

Feminist theory has been applied specifically to stress and trauma. Brown (2004) describes “insidious traumatization,” in which the daily, stressful experiences of being a member of marginalized or target group (e.g., women, African-American, gay or lesbian, etc.) create unique vulnerabilities. Over time, these vulnerabilities can cause smaller, specific stressors to be experienced as significant trauma. An example would be if a person of color hears a racial slur directed towards them; while an observer may perceive this derogatory statement as an isolated, insignificant event, the individual may experience it as trauma, due to a history of related accumulated stressors (Brown, 2004).
Feminist theory and psychotherapy are representative of several emerging critical theories in the psychological literature. These theories seek to “challenge the moral, political, and scientific status of the behavioral sciences…while trying to integrate those critiques into ongoing practice.” (Brown, 2004; p.465). This project will approach the literature using this critical lens, valuing existing research but seeking to understand it contextually and in light of specific societal, cultural, developmental, and gender variables.

*Participant Action Research (PAR)*

Participant Action Research (PAR) is a research methodology that is consistent with critical feminist inquiry. PAR aims to involve all stakeholders in the development of the research process, typically within community-based settings and facilitate social and institutional change (Torbert, 2000). Researchers, participants, and community members share equal status in the PAR approach. Ideally, participants are empowered through their participation and are able to envision and engender change in their communities.

PAR applies a grassroots approach to the research process. Rather than approaching a research question with a set of assumptions and expectations, investigators carefully assess the prospective community and seek input from participants; this is often accomplished through focus groups or needs assessments. An integral component of this approach is that researchers embed themselves within the community of interest, and join with the community to the extent possible (Torbert, 2000). As described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), PAR is generally thought to involve a spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning a change acting and observing the process and consequences of that change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on. (p. 595)
Researchers intentionally become an integral part of the process of change, different from the objective observer role researchers play in traditional research.

**Purpose & Scope of Proposed Study**

This purpose of this proposed study is twofold. First, in conjunction with two other investigators, a girls group will be developed at an urban middle school in Boston. This group will be developed using methodological foundations of PAR, and will include a comprehensive needs assessment of both the school and a target group of girls at that school. An integral part of this research will be the sustained presence of the research team within the school community, and the relationships that will develop within this setting. A broader purpose of this project is to involve the girls in the process of creating positive change in their own community.

The second purpose is to explore ways in which urban adolescent girls experience stress, coping, and resilience. There is a large quantity of research on the impact of stress on urban adolescents, some of which was discussed in the brief literature review included in this chapter. This research primarily explores the psychological symptoms associated with various stressors. The proposed project aims to explore the experience and perception of stress, coping, and resilience for urban girls primarily via qualitative methodology. As a point of comparison, information about coping strategies will also be obtained via questionnaire, and the results contrasted with qualitative inquiry. While the anticipated sample size for this inquiry is very small, this project aims to provide a richer understanding of how a group of urban girls identify, experience and cope with stress, and perceived factors in the group that are aligned with fostering resilience. These constructs will be explored primarily through the lived experiences of the participants. The intended spirit of this project is eloquently conveyed by Way (1995) who writes
the research on urban adolescents has also commonly relied on research methods that impose predetermined definitions and categories on the experiences of the research participants and, thus, do not allow the participants to express themselves in their own words. [Quantitative methodologies] are useful in obtaining information about how well the research participants fit into the categories set up by the scale; they are of less use in exploring the intricacies and subtleties of lived experiences. (p.108)

Though small in scale, this project aims to understand how urban adolescent girls of color understand stress, coping, and experience factors integral in fostering resilience.

Research Questions

There are four general research questions that this study aims to elucidate. As this project is largely qualitative in nature, no specific research hypotheses are provided. However, based on a review of literature and on the author’s own clinical experiences with girls in urban communities, some broad speculation about possible themes is provided.

Question #1

What life events, experiences, or situations are perceived as stressful by adolescent girls attending an urban school setting? It is speculated that the girls will perceive many different types of events as being stressful. These will include family discord, academic pressures, neighborhood violence, discrimination, fitting in with peers, conflicts with friends, dating life, and sexual activity.

Question #2

How do the girls cope with stressful life events, experiences, and situations, and when were these situations understood to be successfully managed? It is speculated that the girls will
use various resources to cope with these situations; these resources include, but are certainly not limited to, talking to peers, parents, teachers, or other significant individuals in their lives, participation in different activities, or relaxation. Coping may also include participation in negative activities, such as drug or alcohol use. It is speculated that girls will implicate multiple factors in their understanding of how and why they survive and thrive (or do not) when facing adversity. Among these factors, there is expected to be an emphasis on strong relationships, particularly with adult mentors. It is not anticipated that girls will use a single coping style given a certain event or situation; rather, different girls will use their available resources in different ways.

A second part of this question is: in what ways girls understand or conceptualize the concepts of successful coping? It is speculated that girls will implicate multiple factors in what was helpful in managing stressors in their lives.

Question #3

In what ways did the Stronglinks Program adequately promote systems implicated in fostering resilience? It is anticipated that some of the adaptive systems and experiences implicated in resilience and development literature, including positive interactions with adults in the school setting, will be reported by the girls following participation in the program.

Question #4

How does data obtained from qualitative and quantitative sources differ? It is expected that there will be some consistencies between these types of data, but the qualitative data may more reflective of the girls’ lived experiences, and more helpful in the understanding the construct of resilience in this group of urban adolescent girls.
Operational definitions

Urban

The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban as all cities and incorporated places with populations of 2,500 or more (1995). It can also be defined as terminology connoting the risks for youth that are associated with living in urban areas with high rates of community violence, poverty, drugs, homelessness, inadequate housing and low rates of resources to health, education and social capital (Leadbeater & Way, 2007).

Resilience

Resilience refers to a process of doing well (developing competencies) and a presence of protective factors despite exposure to significant threats and challenges to adaptation and development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Shaffer et al., 2007). It is a dynamic process that involves multiple factors interacting over time such that individuals can be resilient at one time in life and not at another (Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

Protective factors/ processes

Positive attributes of individuals, their relationships and contexts that predict better adaptation under difficult circumstances can serve as protective factors (Shaffer et al., 2007). They can also include experiences, events and relationships that operate to: a) interrupt harmful developmental trajectories; b) reduce the impact of stressful situations; c) effect change in the pattern of pathogenic family or school situations; d) promote the development and growth of self-efficacy; e) instill beliefs that are incompatible with deviant behaviors; f) provide opportunities for positive education, vocational and personal growth (Leadbeater & Way, 2007). Furthermore, Grant and colleagues (2000) assert that a factor is truly protective (and not merely an absence of risk) if it interacts with risk to predict positive psychological outcomes.
Coping

Coping is defined as conscious, volitional efforts made to regulate emotion, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances (Compas et al., 2001; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2008)

Stress

Stress refers to the psychological or physical symptoms resulting from a perception that one’s resources have been overwhelmed. A stressor is an external factor that produces this experience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Much of the literature to date exploring stress, coping, and resilience in adolescent girls has approached this topic with an empirical lens, heavily influenced by cognitive and information processing theories. Clearly, this line of research makes important contributions to how these constructs are understood, and will be reviewed in this chapter. This project, however, takes a different perspective, aiming to understand the constructs of stress, coping, and resilience through a critical lens. The emphasis will be on understanding how the girls define stress and coping in the context of their own lives, in their own voices, and ways that factors related to resilience are experienced.

Stress & Urban Adolescent Girls

Statistics related to the multiple sources of stress, including poverty, exposure to violence, and discrimination, that face urban adolescents were presented in Chapter One. Existing literature offers some insight into specific ways that urban youth and girls are impacted by these global stressors.

Living in poverty creates a host of stressors that may impact urban adolescents in a variety of ways. Recent literature from behavioral genetics suggests that chronic poverty may have direct effects on children, disrupting developmental processes and actually limiting the heritability of IQ and personality characteristics (e.g., Cleveland, 2003; Turkheimer et al, 2003). Poverty may also have indirect effects, creating high-stress home environments in which numerous family transitions, economic strain, and violence are more likely to occur (Wadsworth
Low income families are more likely to live in substandard housing that is crowded, characterized by high noise levels and a lack of routine in the home (e.g., McLoyd, 1998). Economic pressure created by poverty has also been shown to increase general emotional distress, which can increase both parent-child conflict and negatively impact marital relationships (Conger et al., 1999). Poverty may be instrumental in creating home environments with high levels of family conflict, which can impact children negatively regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds (e.g., McLoyd et al., 2001). Family conflict specifically related to poverty has been associated with internalizing symptoms, such as depression (DeCarlo-Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009). Poverty may also increase parental stress and general levels of fatigue, possibly limiting a child’s ability to acquire coping or general behavioral regulation skills (Gutman, McLoyd, & Tokoyawa, 2005).

Research indicates that African-American and Latino individuals experience stress that is specifically related to their race, culture, and ethnicity. Race-related stress, including experiences of marginalization and discrimination, are particularly salient for adolescents, when peer acceptance is crucial. Much of the research on race-related stress has been focused on adults, but there is recent work examining this construct in adolescents. Romero et al. (2007) examined the perception of stress in bicultural Latinos, and found that reports of higher levels of bicultural stress were associated with reports of less favorable mental health outcomes. This finding was more pronounced for girls, as a correlation between bicultural stress and depressive symptomology was found. For Latinos, sources of bicultural stress include language difficulties, discrimination, and the pressures of acculturation, including a perception that one must adopt the dominant culture and reject one’s own (Romero et al., 2007). Similar results were found by
Benet-Martinez et al. (2002), who specifically examined bicultural stress in Mexican-American adolescents, and identified a positive correlation between stress and depressive symptoms.

Research also examines ways in which African-Americans experience race-related stress. Harrell (2000) identified six different race-related stressors that are experienced by African-Americans. These include: vicarious racism, racism-related life events (such as discrimination), subtle racist microstressors, contextual racial stressors, and collective racial stressors (Harrell, 2000). Utsey and Ponterotto (1996) developed an Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS) to quantify the daily stress that African-Americans experience as a result of racism and discrimination. This measure includes items such as: “You have been questioned about your presence in a White neighborhood for no apparent reason” (Utsey & Ponterotto 1996, p. 495). The IRRS was developed and validated using an adult population, but a recent study by Seaton (2003) examines its use with adolescents. Though Seaton (2003) concludes that some modifications need to be made on the IRRS prior to valid use with adolescents, this study provides initial data suggesting that African-American adolescents experience race-related stress and are able to perceive when such stress occurs.

While not an issue exclusively impacting urban girls of color, bullying and peer victimization appear to be a major stressor for many adolescents. Because research on school bullying has generally found that boys are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of bullying, the ways in which girls experience peer victimization have been overlooked (Carbone-Lopez et al, 2010). Important gender differences exist, however, with girls being more likely to experience gendered violence in school, including sexual harassment (including jokes, harassment, unwanted attention, touching, and coercion) (AAUW, 1993). Girls are also more likely to be victimized by indirect bullying, or relational aggression, which might include being
taunted or being the subject of rumors. It appears that girls are deeply impacted by relational aggression, which is associated with high levels of distress and psychological harm (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Girls appear to fare worse than their male counterparts when victimized by bullying, and experience both negative psychological effects and more significant health consequences (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). One likely explanation for this is that girls are socialized to preserve and protect relationships, and may have difficulty severing ties with toxic peers. Some racial and ethnic differences about bullying emerge from research as well; African-American and Latina girls are more likely to experience direct bullying than their White peers (Sawyer et al., 2008). Youth who attended disadvantaged schools were also at higher risk for experiencing assault or exposure to violence (Burrow & Apel, 2008).

A study by Carbone-Lopez and colleagues (2010) found some interesting correlates between gender and bullying. Girls, perhaps because of their earlier development of verbal capacities, demonstrate bullying at an earlier age than boys, suggesting the need for some targeted programming in middle school or even before. Most damaging for girls in terms of emotional and psychological consequences was repeated indirect bullying. Longstanding exposure to relational aggression was also associated with increased participation in negative activities, such as drug use and gang involvement. Emotional engagement with supportive peers and teachers has been shown to have some protective factors against some negative outcomes related to peer victimization and bullying (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2009).

There is a dearth of research exploring what adolescents themselves perceived as stressful or challenging in their environments, particularly using qualitative methodology. One interesting study by Kobus and Reyes (2000) approached stress and coping in urban Mexican-American adolescents from a descriptive, qualitative perspective. Using both interviews and having
participants choose from a list of potentially stressful life events, adolescents overwhelmingly identified family stressors as most difficult. Friends and school were the second and third most frequently identified sources of stress, respectively (Kobus & Reyes, 2000). Understanding the life stressors identified and experienced by urban adolescents as stressful is important for targeting intervention and programming; exploring this question qualitatively is a critical aim of this project.

**Coping Strategies and Urban Adolescent Girls**

Ways in which these life stressors are understood and managed is broadly conceptualized as coping. Coping acts as a mediator between stressful life events and outcome; understanding successful coping strategies in urban adolescent girls is important in developing interventions that can encourage and support the development of these strategies. Coping in children and adolescents has been extensively explored in the literature. For the scope of this project, literature review will be limited to a general overview of coping strategies, particularly those with application to urban adolescent girls.

In a broad review of coping literature, Compas et al. (2001) identified two primary coping strategies: active and avoidant. Active coping is characterized by cognitive attempts to change thinking about a problem or stressor or behavioral attempts to directly manage the problem. Avoidant coping includes cognitive attempts to minimize a problem or behavioral efforts to directly avoid the threat. For most adolescents, active coping is associated with more effective outcomes. However, for adolescents coping with uncontrollable stressors, including poverty, exposure to violence, and other stressors often faced by urban adolescents, avoidant coping was actually associated with better mental health outcomes. One possible reason for this difference is that active coping in the face of uncontrollable stressors may produce a sense of
helplessness that they can do anything to address the problem (Landis et al., 2007). In fact, avoidant coping has also been demonstrated to have a protective factor in at least one study in a sample of low-income African-American adolescents (Grant et al, 2000).

Other coping strategies common to adolescents have been explored in the literature. Distraction strategies, which are efforts to turn attention away from the stressor by focusing on other activities or thoughts, have also been associated with more positive mental health outcomes in adolescents faced with high levels of uncontrollable stressors (Wisenberg et al., 1993). However, in urban neighborhoods, finding opportunities for distraction can be challenging; given the safety concerns in many urban areas, physical distraction, such as taking a bike ride or going for a walk, may not always be realistic options. In one study using a diverse, low-income sample, adolescents identified using distraction by listening to music, watching TV, or playing video games. The authors point out some additional concerns with using these distraction skills, given the violent, sexual, or aggressive themes in contemporary music, television, or games., particularly in neighborhoods where youth may already perceive their environments as stressful or uncontrollable (Landis et al., 2007).

Another cognitive coping strategy used frequently by girls is rumination, which has been defined as a maintaining a consistent, passive focus on one’s own psychological symptoms or distress, and possible causes or consequences (Grant et al., 2003). When managing high levels of stress, rumination has been demonstrated as an ineffective coping strategy, associated with poor outcomes including increased depression and psychological distress; some research with low-income urban youth indicates that rumination causes similar negative outcomes with this population (Grant et al., 2003). Ruminative coping has been implicated as a factor that may exacerbate the relationship between uncontrollable stress and urban adolescent girls (Landis et
Experience of Resilience in Stronglinks Program

Use of emotional expression as a coping style has also been conceptualized as a form of rumination, in which the passive focus is expressed outwardly, or with others present, rather than via thoughts. Emotional expression appears to be a particularly unhelpful coping strategy used by adolescent girls; in addition to the issues described previously, expressing emotions in this way may increase their vulnerability (Carlson & Grant, 2008).

Social support seeking is another coping strategy used by adolescents that has been explored extensively. The availability of social support has been associated with positive outcome, and even resilience, in low-income urban populations (Li, Feigelman, & Stanton, 2000). However, the efficacy of social support as a coping strategy has been mixed in the literature, with both the availability and the quality of the support acting as possible mediating factors. In low-income samples, seeking support from peers or adults who may also be very highly stressed is one factor impacting the quality of the support offered. Consistent access to quality social support may also be problematic for this population. In one study, Grant et al. (2000) found that social-support seeking for low-income African-American adolescents was effective when coping with significant, specific life events (i.e., death of a family member, divorce), but less effective for managing daily stressors. The authors hypothesized that social networks may make more of an effort to provide available support in the face of major events, but seem unable to sustain continued daily support (Grant et al., 2000).

Other studies have also pointed to this inconsistent efficacy social support coping. In a descriptive, mixed-methodology study, Kobus and Reyes (2000), Mexican-American participants identified support from friends as the most effective way to cope with stressors. For female participants, seeking support from families (especially mothers) was a frequently identified coping strategy. However, all coping styles used to manage friend-related stressors...
were ineffective; in other words, adolescents in this sample struggled in finding ways to manage stress related to peer interactions.

**Resilience & Urban Adolescent Girls**

Resilience is a construct that implies successful or adaptive coping with stressful or difficult life events. It is a topic that has enjoyed recent popularity in psychological literature, although it was not systematically studied until the 1970s (Shaffer et al, 2007). The prevalence of resilience research with urban children and adolescents is encouraging, as it seeks to challenge traditional deficit models, instead focusing on strengths and the unique assets of this population. In her review article *Ordinary Magic*, Masten (2001) defines resilience as “a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (p.228). Threats to good outcomes include low socioeconomic status, community trauma, and maltreatment by a parent (Masten, 2001). Resilience researchers have approached this construct from two primary directions: variable-focused models of resilience and person-focused models of resilience. Variable models investigate potential links between the extent of risk or adversity and protective factors of the resilient individual. Conversely, the person-focused approach compares different individuals with diverse criteria to determine what factors may contribute to resilience. Both models ultimately seek to find factors unique to the resilient youth or her environment.

Resilience literature has expanded to incorporate multiple systems and levels of analysis. The first wave of this research was primarily descriptive, and focused on correlates of resilience in individuals, including efforts to identify factors intrinsic to resilient individuals. One outcome of this line of research is the so-called “short-list” of characteristics common to resilient individuals (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). On this “short list” are factors related to relationships,
including prosocial contact with adults, high quality of parenting, and a strong bond with parents. Other factors involve communities, such as effective schools, connections to prosocial organizations, and possessing socioeconomic advantages (Masten, 2007). A final class of factors that consistently correlate with resilient children involve individual differences, such as high intelligence, a positive outlook on life, and good self-regulation skills (Masten, 2007; Masten & Obradovic, 2006).

Although the scope of this early research on resilience was somewhat limited, this list of factors common to resilient individuals has remained stable throughout the literature, and notably, across different settings and populations. This suggests that there may be some fundamental factors characteristic to resilient individuals. Masten and Obradovic (2006) postulate that, rather than reflecting specific protective traits, this “short list” may hint at the existence of adaptive systems at work in resilient individuals. Potentially adaptive systems might include an attachment system, a family system, or even learning systems within the human brain. Masten and Obradovic (2006) also emphasize the mediating effect of these systems, rather than a casual effect. This emphasis on systems that can positively influence resilience is characteristic of more recent literature on this topic.

As with so many subjects within psychology, resilience is a construct that seemingly becomes more complex as the body of literature grows. As a result, it is becoming clear that multiple levels of analysis of interacting variables, including culture, gender, and context, are required in any investigation of resilience. Conceptualizing resilience in this way complicates matters significantly when considering intervention programs that promote resilience. It would be impossible to design programs that incorporate all dimensions or systems that potentially involve resilience. Furthermore, as the construct of resilience in children and adolescents
expands, it becomes intuitively less accessible. Something about the remarkable nature of resilience, beautifully dubbed “ordinary magic” by researcher Ann Masten (2001), is lost.

Though investigating the various factors at work in resilience is important work with tremendous potential for application, this complexity can detract from understanding the lived experience of resilient children and adolescents. Shaffer et al. (2007) write that resilience research underscores a basic tension between conducting research that is methodologically rigorous and quantitative in nature and pursuing investigations that are more individually focused and oriented towards qualitative methods. Hopefully, the notable potential to integrate these methods can be used by future investigations. (p.69)

This passage highlights conflict between traditional, empirical approaches to resilience investigations and the need for the construct to resonate with the “ordinary magic” observed in resilient children.

Masten (2001) points out that the very definition of resilience is subjective and requires two major judgments. First, researchers must make an assessment about what constitutes a risk or a threat to development. Presumably, if there is a risk or threat, there is an inverse asset or strength. The result is a binary relationship between risks and assets; for example, “good parenting versus bad parenting” or “dangerous community versus safe community.” This dichotomous relationship between variables is rarely reflective of reality, and as a result, resilience variables may be both oversimplified and overlooked. In actuality, these risk variables are on a continuum, and far more complicated than conveyed in many of these investigations. While some risks are clearly negative (such as experiencing a traumatic incident like a robbery or car accident), others are not as plainly so. Consider the example of “dangerous neighborhood.” Negative factors, such as the presence of gangs or reduced police presence, may
certainly exist, but dangerous neighborhoods may also be conducive to positive resilience variables, such as neighborhood activism.

Traditional resilience research also requires the investigator to make a judgment about what exactly constitutes “good” adjustment or development outcomes (Masten, 2001). There is not a single definition of “good” adjustment that is applicable to all children and adolescents, and requires a consideration of, among other variables, setting, cultural background and norms, developmental expectations, and resources. The question of who decides the criteria for “good” and “bad” adjustment is certainly a relevant one, and a question that hints at issues of status and privilege, particularly when considering urban girls. Selecting and defining appropriate resilience variables can also be complicated. Internal adaption criteria, such as psychological well-being, may be more difficult to measure than external adaptation criteria, such as academic achievement. Certain variables will clearly be more pertinent to different populations, and it is important to consider the appropriateness of the selected criteria when evaluating resilience research. There are other assumptions and underlying issues that should be examined when critically approaching resilience research. Implicit in the study of resilient children, for example, is the fact that some children are not resilient, and do not survive and thrive in the face of adversity. Researchers must be mindful of avoiding a “blame the victim” mentality when considering these children, and instead, attempt to carefully evaluate and understand contributing factors, particularly systemic ones.

It is also crucial to examine the implicit judgments that researchers must make when examining resilience, as they have implications for research with urban adolescent girls. When resilience variables are defined in particular ways, they may not be reflective of actual positive adjustment or adaptation. For example, resilience is often operationalized in terms of external
variables, such as achieving expected salient developmental tasks (Shaffer et al., 2007). When defining these variables, it is vital to consider factors such as gender, culture, and environment when determining what resilience looks like in a given population. The construct of competence, or measuring how well a given individual is able to achieve a given task or set of tasks, is pertinent to this discussion. Competence can be measured across a number of domains; in adolescents, it is commonly examined on measures of academic achievement, social interactions, or developmental tasks (Luthar et al., 2007). Shaffer et al. (2007) note that some developmental tasks, such as learning how to walk, are universal, while others vary on dimensions of culture or gender. Girls in some cultures, for example, may be required to learn how to cook or produce handiwork, for example, while developmental milestones for boys might include hunting and building (Shaffer et al, 2007). Different cultures with different values and expectations will clearly have diverse criteria for competence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

As children move into adolescence, competence criteria change and become more complex. For example, managing romantic and sexual relationships becomes a vital component of social competence. Shaffer et al. (2007) note that “as girls grow older, what is expected of them increases in complexity and responsibility, requiring more cognitive capacity, strength, skills, or the maturity that comes with puberty or rites of passage in a culture” (p.55). In their longitudinal study, Project Competence, Shaffer et al. (2007) examined social, academic, and developmental competencies as vital domains contributing to resilience. They describe the difficulties inherent in assessing competency “cutoffs” (i.e., what is competent functioning and what is not), and determining the competency profiles that contribute to resilience in urban adolescent girls. What emerges is that multiple domains of competence contribute to resilience. In other words, there is not a single competency or competency profile that a girl must achieve in
order to succeed in the face of adversity, but rather, multiple pathways and combinations of competencies that seem to contribute to a resilient girl.

Other researchers have approached resilience from a more critical stance, conceptualizing from cultural and contextual perspectives. Ward’s (2007) theory of resistance examines one way in which African-American girls respond to living in a world in which they are continually oppressed and placed in a victim role. Resistance can be defined as “development of a critical consciousness invoked to counter the myriad distortions, mistruths, and misinformation perpetrated about the lives of Black women” (Ward, 2007, p.246). It may be considered a form of cultural resilience, in which girls and women consciously reject and resist biases, actively forming their own identities that encompass race, gender, and culture. Resistance is a very deliberate and active derivation of resilience, in which girls are taught to “ask the critical questions, challenge and test assumptions, and determine what is really going on” (Ward, 2007, p.253). An important component of Ward’s (2007) concept of resistance is that African-American girls must be taught how to be critical of these larger systems; she implicates mothers and adult mentors as responsible for transmitting this knowledge and skill.

Fostering Resilience in Schools

Positive experiences in schools have been specifically implicated as a crucial factor in promoting resilience (Condly, 2006; Luthar, 2006). In addition, schools are one of the major systems interacting with the lives of urban adolescent girls. School is a unique context in which several domains of functioning intersect, including academic, social, and developmental spheres. It is also a setting in which students ideally have consistent contact with adults over a period of time. Positive experiences and development within schools seem linked to a combination of a supportive climate, students being held to high expectations, warm relationships, and consistent
structure and discipline (Masten et al., 2008). Further, an effective experience within a school system is one of the adaptive systems implicated on the “short list” of systems or traits consistently identified in the literature as a correlate of resilient individuals (Masten, 2007). While urban school systems may be problematic in many domains, especially in regards to available resources, significant adults within the schools can make a tremendous difference in terms of fostering resilient girls. Masten et al. (2007) speculate that one way in which adult mentors in a school setting contribute to this resilience is by providing crucial opportunities for children to engage many of the systems that seem to be key in developing resilience, such as by cultivating competence, modeling self-regulation skills, and by guiding children through key developmental tasks.

Galassi and Akos (2007) developed a school-based framework called Strength-Based School Counseling (SBSC) that is highly consistent with resilience theory, and nicely translates key aspects of resilience research into principles more easily applicable for intervention. Although SBSC was developed specifically for application to the school counselor, it has relevance to the goals emphasized in the program developed in the Stronglinks project, particularly in terms of building resilience. SBSC has roots in counseling, community, and positive psychology, and emphasizes the promotion of etic and emic strengths, or respectively, strengths that transcend culture and strengths that are unique to a given culture (Ponterotto et al., 2008). In this model, the school is seen as an ideal context and opportunity to promote strengths; school counselors are urged to acknowledge and incorporate contextual factors as they facilitate positive development in students. Strength-enhancing environments are associated with positive youth development; it is crucial, then, to promote and provide the opportunity for students to participate in such environments through leadership, advocacy, and system-wide activism. The
focus in SBSC is not on eliminating problem behavior or for adults to assume a reactive role in managing disruptive behaviors. Rather, the emphasis shifts to promoting positive development, fostering systems known to be related to resilience, and allowing key adults within the school setting to assume proactive roles (Galassi & Akos, 2007).

Related is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model, which emphasizes cultivating strengths in children and adolescents as a way to facilitate positive development (Lerner et al., 2007). Like SBSC, the emphasis in PYD is not on reactivity or managing problems, but on promoting strengths, competence, and resilience. When defined in terms of strengths rather than deficit, urban children are quite successful (Lerner et al, 2007). In this way, PYD directly counters deficit models of mental illness. The focus is on factors that will help children thrive, rather than simply looking at markers of poor outcomes (e.g., drug use, poor academic performance, psychiatric diagnosis). At the core of PYD is the notion that youth should be considered as valuable resources that can be developed, not simply problems to be managed or contained (Lerner et al, 2007). Within this model, adolescent development is fluid, and occurs through the interaction of a child with certain resources in his or her environment. These resources, also known as the “5-C’s” of PYD, are: Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. Each environment where a child lives has some potential to provide resources to promote PYD. Specific components of youth-serving programs have been identified as especially helpful in promoting PYD: providing activities that build important life skills; providing opportunities to use life skills both in the program and as community members; and developing positive, sustained relationships with adults (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Ongoing longitudinal projects with interventions that promote PYD indicate that participants demonstrate academic improvement, better engagement with school, higher expectations for the future, and
lower rates of depression (Lerner et al., 2009a).

A construct implicit in both SBSC and PYD is mattering. Dixon & Tucker (2008) define mattering as “involv[ing] individuals’ perceptions that they are important and are valued by other people in interpersonal relationships and within systems.” Communicating to students that they matter seems to be one mechanism in which key adults within schools can promote resilient systems. Suggestions for increasing a students’ sense that they matter to adults include: verbally and nonverbally attending to students; demonstrating how important a student is to the process of a group or counseling by frequently acknowledging their contributions and attendance; and communicating that the adult actually relies on the student to achieve specified goals and outcomes (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). Mattering is an experiential component of the mentorship relationship that may be vitally tied to the adaptive systems crucial to resilience.

Mattering is also an essential aspect of feminist methods of inquiry, such as Participant Action Research (PAR). As PAR aims to involve all stakeholders in the development of the research process, and aims to facilitate social and institutional change, it is communicated to participants that their input is vital, that they matter. Ideally, participants are empowered through participation and are able to envision and engender change in their communities. In other words, the very process of participating in PAR may engage some of the adaptive systems implicated in resilience.

**Summary and Implications**

Literature on stress, coping, and resilience is expansive. Recent research on these constructs has elucidated factors specific to urban adolescent girls. This population is one that faces a distinct set of stressors, and manages them using a set of strategies and available strengths and resources. Stressors that appear to highly impact urban adolescents include the
fallout of poverty, such as the toll it may take on family relationships, relational aggression and peer victimization, and race-related stressors. Ways these stressors are managed are often conceptualized broadly in to approach and avoidant coping; while approach coping has generally been more highly associated with better mental health outcomes in adolescents, this issue is more complicated with an urban population. Avoidant coping styles may actually be more helpful for urban adolescents when managing uncontrollable, unpredictable global stressors. Coping using social supports was another coping strategy used by urban adolescents that also had mixed outcomes, highly contingent on the quality, consistency, and availability of the social support.

Resilience is a topic that has enjoyed recent popularity in psychological literature; this literature is best viewed through a critical lens, with a keen awareness that much resilience research is rooted in the deficit model of mental illness. As a construct, resilience appears best conceptualized as an interactional process, rather than as a set of qualities that an individual either possesses or lacks. There do appear to be qualities characteristic to resilient individuals but recent contributions from the PYD model posit a fluid development of these qualities in the context of certain experiences. When defined in terms of their strengths rather than focusing on deficits, urban adolescents appear to thrive.

Absent from literature on stress, coping, and resilience are the clear voices of urban adolescent girls. Exploring ways that girls understand, define, and experience these constructs in their daily lives will offer an important contribution to existing literature. Using participant action methodology will highlight the lived experiences of girls while they participate in a school-based program, and determine aspects of programming that may foster resilience and coping.
CHAPTER THREE

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 by Christina Tortolani, Amanda Allen, and Lindsay Amper.

Participants

This research project was a collaborative effort of three doctoral student colleagues, Christina Tortolani, Amanda Allen and Lindsay Amper, who worked alongside the RALLY program (Responsive Advocacy for Life and Learning in Youth) to develop an after school curriculum for urban, middle school girls.

Given the feminist grounding and scope of this project, an essential task for researchers was to establish a presence in the school community, and build relationships with important people there. This was accomplished with the aid of key individuals who were already important members of the school community; through affiliation with these respected and trusted individuals, researchers gained access to their target population, and earned initial credibility in the school community via their association.

Gil Noam, Ph.D., the creator and director of the RALLY program, served as a consultant and an advisor over the development and implementation of the program, including providing researchers with access to participants in the school setting. Sarah Bernhardt-Peterson, LICSW, served as the on-site school coordinator for the RALLY program and was an important consultant and support during the program. Sarah was integral to the success of this program, and supported the recruitment of girls and the
acquisition of necessary materials. Additionally, Sarah supervised the RALLY master’s level interns, who worked with the girls in the school on a more regular basis. With the help of Sarah, 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 involved in this program. Classroom teachers were involved in the recruitment process for this program, and were supportive of the program. In order to make this project a success, school administrators were integral in assisting with room availability and coordination of special events and/or announcements.

Setting

The Mary Curley School is located in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, an urban neighborhood of Boston with a population of 36,293 people and median household income of $46,592 (state average is $49,959). It is made up of a number of distinct historical subdistricts 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 Jamaica Plain was 50% Non-Hispanic White, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Black or African-American, 7% Asian-American, and 3% Other (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008).

Jamaica Plain is a progressive community where culturally-relevant businesses such as botanicas thrive and reflect the ethnic diversity of the community. In addition, the Jamaica Plain 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 Jamaica Plain as a healthy, diverse, and sustainable neighborhood through a comprehensive strategy of community empowerment, economic development, and affordable housing development (Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, 2010).
The Mary Curley School is one of one hundred and forty three schools in the Boston Public School District. It serves K - 8 and has approximately 650 students, 50.8% male and 49.2% female. The student to teacher ratio is 1:10. The students are 23.4% African-America, 58.4% Hispanic, 13.2% White, 2.9% Asian, 0.4% Native Hawaiian, 0.0% Native American 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,” 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%) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 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. This includes that Hyde Square Task Force, an organization that provides after school tutorial services for grades 6-8. 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. When compared to schools nationally and state-wide using accountability standards determined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Curley School is struggling. Based on 2008 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data, Curley 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 this 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. Despite these very low
performance statistics for 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Education (2008) reports that Curley was on target for meeting improvement goals in 2009.

Materials

Informed Consent & Permission Slips

A packet containing consent forms, including an informed consent form and a RALLY permission slip, was sent home with girls who selected the Pod. Assent to participate in the Stronglinks program was also obtained from participants, following a set of talking points. A copy of these forms can be found in Appendix A.

Materials for Groups

The materials needed for the group projects varied depending on the activities planned for specific groups. These included a variety of arts and crafts material, including, but not limited to, glue, scissors, papers, markers, paint, paper mache, magazines, and plastic “gimp” or lanyard string. A laptop computer or a portable CD player was used in some groups for playing music. Healthy snacks, such as granola bars, fruit, crackers, and cereal bars, were provided for each group.

Instruments

Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist-Revision 1 (CCSC-R1; Program for Prevention Research, 1999)

The CCSC-R1 is a 54-item self-report inventory developed to assess the coping strategies of children and adolescents. It takes approximately 10 minutes to administer and may be read aloud if necessary. The 54 items are grouped into 10 subscales that cluster to form 4 factors: active coping, distraction coping, avoidant coping, and social support-seeking coping. Adolescents then rate statements representing coping strategies on a 1 – 4 (1= never to 4 = most
of the time) scale. Examples of coping strategies include: “You told people how you feel about the problem” or “You listened to music.” The 10 subscales and four factors have internal consistencies ranging from adequate to good (Ayers et al., 1996). The scale has been used with adolescents from diverse racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Ayers et al., 1996). Landis et al. (2007) report reliabilities using the CCSC-R1 with a diverse adolescent population comparable to those reported in previous research (α = 89 for active coping; α = 77 for distraction coping; α = 82 for social-support-seeking coping; α = 74 for avoidant coping).

Prelow et al. (2002) found similarity in responses on the CCSC-R1 across ethnic groups on the Active and Avoidant factors of this instrument. Gaylord-Harden et al. (2008) examined the CCSC-R1 with a low-income African-American sample, and did not find confirmation for the four-factor model of this instrument. Important differences were found in the ways African-American youth reported about coping when compared to other groups. This study highlights that, even on instruments validated for use with diverse populations, caution should still be used when interpreting results, and that important differences exist within multicultural samples.

Research Design

The research design was based on the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, as it is a methodology designed to provide individuals with a voice and empower them as experts on their own lives. In PAR, researchers are assumed to be concurrent participants in the process. A goal is engagement and mutual connection with the participants, with the aim of maintaining a central focus on participants’ voices, empowering participants to identify issues in their lives and communities, and to make positive changes. Rather than approaching participants as subjects to be studied, PAR researchers focus on relationships and aim to deeply understanding individuals (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Fine, 1998; Fine et al., 2003; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Mckelvey,
2003; Way, 1995).

The intent of this research project is twofold: to gain a deep understanding of girls’ experiences of stress, coping, and resilience, and to help the girls’ to make changes, to grow, and to learn. With respect to these goals, PAR is the most appropriate method of inquiry.

**Measures and Procedures**

In spring of 2008, the researchers developed and ran a pilot program with 5-8 young women at Curley School. This pilot program ran for six weeks and was used to help the researchers develop a developmentally appropriate curriculum that would be both interesting and helpful to the future participants, as well as to gain an initial understanding of pertinent issues impacting girls in this particular school and community. A series of questionnaires were used to gather information about what activities and discussions were helpful to participants in the pilot group, and which were not. The young women in the pilot program were not the same girls in that participated in Stronglinks and their responses are not a part of this research project; however, their responses helped the researchers to understand the strengths and benefits of their programmatic ideas. Recruitment for the pilot program was conducted via word of mouth in the school and through classroom presentations by the researchers. Girls received a permission slip and an informed consent form that were sent home and returned.

Weekly group topics for the Stronglinks program were developed around four general themes and foci: self, relationships, understanding of meaningful events and coping, and vision for the future. These topics were developed using the RALLY program goals, the interest areas of the research team, and information form the spring 2008 pilot group. A detailed group curriculum can be located in Appendix C.

In Spring 2009, recruitment for the Stronglinks group began. As previously explained,
this group was offered as an elective as part of the school’s POD (Period of Discovery) curriculum. Researchers recruited for Stronglinks by visiting eligible classrooms the week prior to POD selection and giving brief presentations about the group and some of the planned activities. Most important was recruiting a sample of girls who would comprise the Stronglinks program. The program was offered to all grade levels and to girls that are and who are not members of the RALLY program as part of the school’s POD (“Period of Discovery”) program. This program offered electives chosen by students that were held for the last hour of the school day, once a week, on a rotating schedule during the academic year. Examples of PODs being offered concurrently with Stronglinks were dancing and photography groups.

For girls who selected the Stronglinks POD, permission slips were sent home with the girls to obtain consent to participate in both RALLY and to provide informed consent for participation in the research study. Verbal assent to participate was obtained from the girls themselves, which included obtaining their assent to be audiotaped. Each researcher also called the home of several participants in order to explain the program, answer any questions, and review the informed consent form with parents. The informed consent forms were signed by parents and sent back to the school with the girls.

This is was a mixed-methodology study designed to assess girls’ experiences of stress and coping, and ways that resilience was fostered via participation in a school-based program. Semi-structured interviews were used to help the researcher understand the girls’ lives before, during and after the group. Pre-group interviews occurred during week two of the group, so that the participants will have already met the researchers at least one time before their first interview. For purposes of this study, pre-group interviews were intended to provide information about how girls coped with their life problems, general interests, support systems, stressors, and
relationships before participation in Stronglinks. Interviews were also used to tweak some group content, by assessing, for example, if girls were comfortable or familiar with arts activities of any kind. Some young women preferred music to visual arts, and knowing these preferences may have had an impact on how much they might enjoy and benefit from certain activities. This study aimed to build upon the girls’ perceived strengths, so the pre group interviews were important for gathering information about their developmental assets.

Post-group interviews occurred during the last week of group, and the following week in some cases. The purpose of post group interviews was to gather information about questions like: what the young women enjoyed/disliked about the program, how they feel they have grown and learned from their experience in the program, if they have made any life changes, had any mood changes, and improved peer or adult relationships. Pre- and post-group interview templates can be found in Appendix D and E.

The groups themselves were held weekly in a science classroom in the Mary Curley Elementary School in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts for a period of seven weeks from April 2009 through June 2009. Groups were approximately one hour in length and were facilitated by at least two of the researchers. Although the researchers worked as a team, each also 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 mentor read and responded to their participants’ entries each week. The journal responses provided another source of qualitative information, although were not used for data analysis in this project.

Because the three researchers in this project used additional and different measures to
answer their own research questions, each researcher administered both her own and her colleagues’ measures to the youth they were assigned to mentor.

Researchers also took detailed group notes, compiled immediately upon completion of group each week, in order to understand group processes and track each individual’s participation in the program. Information from these process recordings was not used in for this specific project.

Data Analysis

Information from the semi-structured interviews, journals, and process notes were transcribed by the researchers. For the purpose and scope of this project, only data from semi-structured interviews was used in thematic analysis. This approach was inductive because it originated from the raw data versus from theory or research, emphasizing the participants’ voices and experiences to the greatest extent possible. The approach to thematic analysis used in this project has been outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The stages of this analysis are: Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data; Phase 2: Generating initial codes; Phase 3: Searching for themes; Phase 4: Reviewing themes; Phase 5: Defining and naming themes; and Phase 6: Producing the report.

In Phase 1, the transcripts were carefully read and reviewed, and initial impressions of data were made. Any notes taken during interviews were also reviewed. In Phase 2, interesting features of the data were coded systematically. In thematic analysis, a code is defined as the most basic feature of data that is interesting to the researcher and can be analyzed in a meaningful way. Codes are generally more specific then themes, which tend to be broader. At the end of this phase, data was sorted into lists of initial codes. During Phase 3, these codes were organized and sorted into larger themes. Each code was analyzed, and ways that codes might combine into
broader, meaningful themes were considered. All data potentially relevant to each theme were initially included into these themes. At the end of this phase, a preliminary list of themes and subthemes was generated.

In Phase 4, the themes that were identified were compared to the narratives for consistency. When it became evident that there was not enough data to support them, themes were collapsed, eliminated, or merged. After themes were obtained, they were compared to interview data to assure that they “fit” with the data, and reflective of participants’ voices. Ways that themes interact with each other were also explored in this phase. In Phase 5, the themes were defined more clearly, and on-going analysis occurred to get more information about specifics conveyed by each theme. Names and clear definitions for each theme were provided during this phase of analysis. Finally, in Phase 6, themes were placed in the larger context of the project as a whole. This included selecting examples from narratives to illustrate aspects of each theme, relating these themes back to research questions and existing literature, and incorporating themes into the research and discussion sections of this paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data verification is an important aspect of qualitative analysis to assure adherence to narratives and improve validity of the results. Two forms of verification are recommended by Creswell (2009), triangulation and peer review. In this project, triangulation was used with data on coping strategies, in which different data sources (interview data and questionnaire data) were compared and points of convergence and contrast were discussed. Peer review was also used for verification. After themes were identified, samples of interview transcripts were read by some of this researchers’ colleagues who compared themes to the narratives to assure adherence. Three peer reviewers with at least a masters degree in psychology were used in analysis. None of the peer reviewers were involved in the project, or had any prior knowledge of the data. These
reviewers offered feedback about whether identified themes fit with raw data, and suggestions to keep themes more strongly tied to narrative data. Ideally, results would have been shared with participants to verify themes; unfortunately, this was not possible given that many of the girls moved to other schools or could not be located during the summer months.

For the CCSC-R1, descriptive statistics were calculated. Each measure was scored as described in the assessment manual. Scores for each of the thirteen subcategories and four categories were calculated for both individuals and for the entire group, pre- and post-group. Means and standard deviations for pre- and post-group measures are reported in Tables 1 through 11 in Appendix F. This quantitative data will be discussed through a descriptive lens, comparing the responses given in the questionnaire to those provided by participants during semi-structured interviews. Full descriptions of the CCSC-R1 scales are available in Appendix B.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

The final Stronglinks group sample initially consisted of eleven young women with diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Ten girls participated in pre-group interviews and completed the group. Nine girls completed post-group interviews. Templates for pre- and post-group interviews are found in Appendix D and E, respectively. Pre-group interviews were transcribed live by the interviewer, as permission for audio recording had not been obtained when these interviews were conducted. Post-group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed at a later date. Girls were given the opportunity to decline audio recording. One subject declined to be recorded, so both her interviews were transcribed. Pre-group interview data was obtained from ten of the girls; one girl was unable to be interviewed for pre-group assessment due to scheduling conflicts. Post-group interview data was also obtained from ten of the girls; one of the girls did not return to school for the final two weeks of the year, and attempts to reach her via phone to schedule an interview were not successful. Ten girls completed the 54-item Child Coping Skills Checklist (CCSC-R1) measure, both pre- and post-group.

The mean age of the sample was 13.1 years old. The group was composed of nine Latina girls, one mixed Latina/African American girl, and one Caucasian/Latina girl. Of the Latina girls, two identified as Puerto Rican, one as Dominican, one as Dominican and African American, one as Brazilian, one as El Salvadorian, one as Cuban and one as Guatemalan. Two girls did not identify any specific ethnicity, defining themselves broadly as Latina. One girl identified herself as Haitian. Ten girls were in the seventh grade, one was in the eighth grade. For the purposes of reporting and discussing data, girls have been assigned fictional names.
Qualitative Results

The qualitative data set consisted of pre- and post-group transcribed interviews with the girls who participated in the Stronglinks group. The process for analyzing this data using thematic analysis was described in detail in Chapter Three.

Defining Stress

During pre-group interviews, girls were asked to answer the question: “How do you define stress?” Girls were then asked to rate their daily stress level on a scale from one to ten, with one being very little stress and ten being the most stress they have ever experienced. When asked directly to provide a definition of stress, the majority of girls defined this concept in terms of somatic and emotional experiences, or a combination of the two. Without exception, every girl who described stress in somatic terms defined it as being tired or something that interferes with sleep. A typical definition comes from Sara who says: “stress is...just tiring.” Other girls defined stress in terms of emotional factors, particularly citing the roles of anger, sadness, and irritation in their descriptions. Girls also talked about excessive worry as something contributing heavily to stress. “Stress is...feeling put down, um, being angry and sad all the time. Being down and out,” described Juliana. “Having a lot of pain and anger built up” was how Maria defined stress, while Isabella described “going through depression and difficulty.”

Other girls combined somatic and emotional factors in their definitions. Being tired was again the physical experience of stress described by all girls who defined stress in this way. An example comes from Natalie who defines stress as “when you’re tired and got a lot of stuff on your mind.” Isabella defined stress this way: “It’s kind of difficult. It’s always on your mind and I don’t know how to explain it, I’m bad at explaining. I guess when you are tired and when it’s hard for you to sleep at night.” One girl was not able to provide a definition for stress, and
Marisa provided a more external definition for this experience, stating “stress to me is drama and people talking.” When asked to rate stress using a numerical scale, the average rating across all girls was 4.95 out of 10 points. The highest rating was 8.5 out of 10 and the lowest was 2.5 out of 10.

Stressful Experiences

In addition to being asked to define stress, girls were asked in both pre- and post-group interviews to discuss difficult and challenging situations they had encountered. Several main themes emerged from these discussions; they will be presented here based on the frequency with which they were identified as stressful by this sample.

Relationships with Other Girls

Difficult relationships with other girls in their lives, particularly girls in their own school environment, was identified and discussed at length by nearly every girl in this sample. It was the most frequently identified source of stress for these girls. This theme was brought up at multiple junctures in both pre- and post-group interviews. “Drama” was a word often used to describe the fallout from conflicts in female relationships. Clara reports: “Ugh, there’s a lot of drama in this school. Stupid things. Bochinche, people talking about me...I hate it.” Juliana talked about her take on difficult female relationships, noting that they were far more stressful for her than romantic ones:

Like for me, I think dating is actually better than friendships. Like in friendships, you deal with drama, you deal with rumors, you deal with backstabbing, the whole “oh, you’re talking about me” and stuff like that. It’s like, “you’re really gonna listen to her or him over me?” And it’s like, “Ok, you’re listening to other people, so I don’t think we can be friends”
Experience of Resilience in Stronglinks Program

Different aspects of these relationships were identified as stressful. One issue that came up frequently was being judged and talked about by other girls, including friends. Being judged about clothing, and the conclusions made about a girl’s identity based on her appearance was a common experience. As Brianna describes:

> But sometimes girls just, cuz you dress like, some girls dress like showing their breasts and something they think that you are a ho in this school. I hate that, actually, girls that judge other girls, that say stuff about other girls. But yeah they do judge here. If you dress like boring and things, you know, not matching, wearing big things like you don’t really care about your dress, they will think that you are the type of girl that is just into studies and stuff. If you dress hoochie everyday, like if you dress half naked, they think you are a ho. In this school, that’s a big issue. That’s the biggest problem in this school…when you come to school dressed like, like some girls come with shorts and shirts that show a little bit, they think that, from that, we girls think that they are hos. Hos…go around with many guys. Just because a person is beautiful and pretty outside, inside doesn’t mean that they are the same way. Cause people right now you can see the girls they are beautiful and stuff, but when you get to meet them, inside they are like, they are just a bad person, like bad influence.

Ashlee relates her experiences of being evaluated based on appearance:

> sometimes you think something’s wrong about yourself cause people criticize or make fun of you for that. An example is when they think I’m Chinese….they call you chinita, not really bad, sometimes just gets on my nerves, so sometimes I have something to say back.
Being judged by other girls often led to hurt feelings and the sense that other girls, including those once held as close friends, could no longer being trusted. As Juliana put it, “these fake friends, they’re stressing me.” The inability to trust others, and the emotional ramifications of that, was another factor heavily cited in why friendships with girls were stressful. Isabella describes her experiences with such relationships:

Well yeah, but some friends….you can’t really trust them. I have some close friends but they aren’t really trustworthy. [One girl] used to be my best friend then she ended up doing something that really hurt my feelings, and since then she kept doing it. Then she started telling people stuff behind my back. It hurt me.

Valerie more concisely describes this experience: “Girls are just mean.” She goes on to describe that, in her experience, difficulties in female relationships often become physical, resulting in “lots of people fighting over stuff in the halls.”

**Family Issues**

Stress related to managing difficult family relationships was another theme that emerged from discussions with this group. Within this category, girls described different sources of stress: turbulent relationships with their parents and siblings; family illness and death; and having to assume high levels of responsibility within their homes. Often, girls described multiple sources of stress within their family systems. Juliana’s description of her family stressors was such a response:

[My] family members—so I am Cuban and 10 different other things and my family members always being deported and going away. Mom and dad have been adding stress, fighting. My sister throws me off guard, I’m always fighting with her.
Having to assume high amounts of responsibility for siblings and household duties was brought up by several girls in the group. When asked what in her life she identified as most stressful, Iris stated, “my brothers…they always make messes and I have to clean it up.” Natalie reported, “when I have a lot of stuff to do and then babysit my brother, that is a lot of stress.”

Several girls in the group described having to take on very adult responsibility within their families. Isabella stated, “My mom is very sick with thromosis [sic] and I am always taking care of her and my little sister. And cleaning…it’s a lot.” Sara also talks about her caretaking responsibilities within her family as a significant stressor for her:

I always have a lot of responsibility. I raised [my sisters] more than my mom did, ever since I was five. When I was five, my little sister was three and I didn’t have my other little sister yet cause she wasn’t born yet. And I was taking care of her until I was the age I think 8 and that was when my other sister was born…then I started taking care of both of them.

She went on to describe significant consequences that resulted from assuming this difficult responsibility in the absence of parental guidance; her sisters were taken away by the Department of Social Services and placed in foster homes. Sara continues to feel responsible for their wellbeing, and poignantly described:

[My sisters] got taken away last year around October. I was angry, I don’t know, who they gonna be with? I don’t know- all I know is their foster father could be a rapist or something, I don’t know. But what really got me pissed off was that is was actually DSS that took them away and the history of DSS is not very good. They usually assign, they think they assign kids to perfect families but then like…a boy got raped. DSS doesn’t have a good history. I miss them. I love them very much.
While Sara was no longer directly responsible for her sisters’ care and wellbeing, she continued to experience distress from their loss and a continued sense of accountability for their care. Issues specific to relationships within families were also raised by several girls, including conflict with parental figures, mistrust of adults, and communication problems. Maria described her relationship with her mother this way: “My mom is nice, but I have some dislikes. She lies a lot. I don’t trust her and she has this perspective that she always want to be right.” Clara notes that “my mom and I disagree a lot.” The primary source of disagreement between Clara and her mother turned out to be her mother’s boyfriend. Clara described their relationship, and how it impacts her and her mother’s relationship:

I just don’t like him... His attitude, the way he acts...he acts like a child. He like lies a lot.

I ignore him. I act like he is not even there.... sometimes when he does stuff, I told him “ugh” and my mom gets mad and like tells me not to do that... the things he does. He lies a lot to my mom and to me. If I show my sadness, my mom will get mad.

*Relationships with Boys*

Managing relationships with boys, including dealing with issues related to sex and dating, was another theme to emerge from interviews with this sample of girls. Just over half of the girls raised issues with boys as stressful in some way. Many girls expressed frustration or annoyance related to their interactions with the opposite sex. As Ashlee described it, “boys are stressful and stupid...most of the time. I guess it’s true what they say, girls mature more than boys.” She goes on to note the sometimes hurtful nature of these interactions, “cause sometimes like they do stupid things and sometimes if a girl really likes them that much and then [boys] hurt them, that’s like, it hurts, you know?” Valerie simply responded “Boys...boys are a distraction” when asked what she finds most stressful in her life. The concept of “drama” was again raised in the context
of relationships with boys; in addition to dealing with the relationship itself, girls had to manage being talked about and judged by others. Brianna stated

That really reminded me of bad things that happened to me with relationships with guys. I know that now these days, it's 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, it's not really good. I don’t think that going out with guys in school is really good so. I went out with two already in school and if I have to go back I would regret going out with them. And for me, I am not going to risk my friends because of a guy.

Relationships with boys, the resulting “drama,” and emotional fallout, were complicated by sex. Brianna again explains

Yeah, they just start talking and some guys just want to take girls and have sex with them and then leave them. I have some friends with a boyfriend they been in a relationship for a long time and she thought he was the right man to lose her virginity to, and once she lost it, I’m not going to say names, I don’t think she, but once she lost her virginity with that guy, the next day he dumped her. And they been together six months, that was a pretty long relationship and she was like, she thought it was the time and that was the right guy but when actually she, she actually waited and then did it, he left her. So, that’s why she right now is really hurt and stuff.

She concludes that relationships with boys may not be worth the emotional toll for her, at least not for some time, and not in the school setting:
Ok, there is time, the world is going to come to an end, when we come to school its not to be playing around to joke. There is going to be times when we are older that we could do those things, like date and stuff.

Dangerous Neighborhoods

Violence within communities was another theme that emerged as a stressor. Girls brought up shootings, gangs, and being targeted or harassed on the street as examples of these types of community stressors. Sara said “yeah...walking home from bus stop and harassed by guys...I don’t feel safe all the time.” Isabella described violence on her street, “there used to be a gang that, you know, shot around in front of houses, but not no more.” Another girl hinted at a chaotic neighborhood, “There are always a lot of people outside, like telling me to come over there and stuff, hanging out. But I don’t want to.” Juliana echoed this statement, describing her street: “near where I live there are a lot of gang members and parties up the street. Most times I feel safe, but others I don’t.” Ashlee discussed similar issues in her community: There is a lot of shooting. Violence. I know most of them. A little bit of violence. I don’t like walking alone, I don’t feel safe.” Many of the girls who discussed dangerous neighborhoods also shared strategies for staying safe in their communities, such as walking with a group or staying in after dark.

Other Stressors

The themes described above are ones that emerged across multiple interviews, with at least four girls in the study. However, several other identified stressors emerged that were not categorizable within main themes, but are worth mention. Financial hardship is an example, mentioned just once directly. Lack of money problems seems more related to how girls conceptualize success. For example, Sara mentioned her sister as someone she perceived to be thriving, and described her in terms of her financial success:
my sister- she’s really successful. She’s, um, a doctor’s assistant and they pay her- she just got a raise- like 600 and something, like that might now be good, good, cause she has to pay the bills but its good cause that’s a lot of money. She’s trying to buy her own house.

For Sara, not having to struggle with bills was related to overall success.

Body image and its relationship to self-esteem was another stressor that was raised just once directly during these interviews. Isabella stated “I have really low self-esteem. For me, to look in the mirror, I look but I don’t see a happy person…I don’t like my physical appearance.” Though mentioned directly just once, these body image issues may have arisen more subtly in the context of problematic relationships with other girls, especially feeling judged or perceived unfavorably.

Only one girl explicitly mentioned academic issues in the discussion of her stressors. “The MCAS, getting a bad grade on it.”

Coping & Resilience

Understanding how girls in this sample coped with these identified stressors, and made sense of when these had been successfully managed was the second research question explored by this project.

Managing Stress

During pre-group interviews, girls were asked the question: “What do you currently do to help yourself manage or deal with your stress?” When asked directly, six of the girls said they managed stress by using some sort of distraction, often to boost their mood, such as sleeping, eating, watching television, or playing on the computer. An example of such a response comes from Isabella, who stated “when I’m stressed, I listen to music that gets me hyped up or I watch
funny shows on TV to make me laugh.” Natalie reported managing her stress in a similar way: “well I either go on the computer—chat with friends or play videogames or watch a movie…or just try go to sleep or try to read a book or listen to music.” Ashlee said she will usually “listen to music, I guess to calm me down.” The remaining four girls who completed pre-group interviews each provided a different way in which they manage stress. Valerie said, “I stop and think about the consequences.” Maria managed stress by “relaxing and trying to get it off my mind…sometimes I cry if I’m really stressed.” Juliana shared that she seeks help and support from a family member: “I talk to one of my sisters. She’s my mentor…she helps me make really hard decisions.” One girl, Marisa, after considering the question of how she manages stress responded that she does “nothing.”

In addition to being directly asked how they manage stress, interviews with the girls were analyzed for coping themes. Discussions about identified stressful situations were reviewed to explore how girls were managing them. This analysis broadened the coping skills directly identified by the girls by examining examples of how they had actually managed stress in their lives. Several main themes emerged from these discussions; they will be presented here based on the frequency with which they were used to cope with stress by this sample. Themes are reported here if they were described by at least four girls within this group. In the discussions, the same girls often described multiple ways in which they managed stress.

*Seeking Support from Others*

Although only explicitly identified by one girl as the way that she manages stress, seeking support from others was the predominant theme that emerged from the interviews. Talking to friends, family, and school staff were all identified as ways in which girls in the group coped with stressors. Even given the difficulties earlier noted in relationships with other girls,
members of this group still talked to female friends as a primary way to cope with stressors.

Juliana explains:

[I talk to] my friends. Because my parents aren’t always there when I need them. And anyway, they can’t help me in the situation. Friends are real, always there to talk to and always there when I need them. Basically my parents don’t get where I’m coming from, one little thing might pull a trigger and get them mad or they might think I’m sayin’ the wrong thing.

Girls noted that they didn’t just talk to any peer about their problems, but they needed to talk to “real” friends, and were specific about criteria defining “real friends.” Trust seemed to be the main factor defining a “real friend.” Natalie defines being “real” as “someone you can tell your deepest secrets to and they can save them and not tell you and you can trust them on everything.”

Real friends pay careful attention and listen. Natalie goes on to say, “first thing, when I’m talking to you, you got to listen to me or I’ll get mad.” Mutuality also seemed to be important when identifying “real friends.” Isabella says “a real friend is…one you care about and help them out in a situation when they need somebody. Not just you help them, but they help you. They’re there for you too.” Maria says she talks to “a few close friends – but all the time they have to be real. I tell them, and I am always honest with them and don’t lie to them.” She goes on to talk about why she prefers talking to her friends over family members when managing difficult or stressful issues:

um, I mean it’s kinda hard with family….you’ve known them longer, but sometimes you have to earn it, like, your family’s always there for you no matter what, and also like there are some problems you wouldn’t talk to them about so you go to your friends about those.
Other girls in the sample identified talking to family members as a way to manage their stress. Mothers and sisters in particular were identified as family members sought out for support. “I talk to my mom and my little sister, I feel like I connect with them and have a lot of things in common with them,” reports Isabella. She continues:

Well, [my mom] gives good advice. She gives good advice and always says “mothers are always right.” I never used to listen to it but one day she told me to do something and I didn’t, and I got in trouble so I think now that is true (laughs). Well, sometimes!

Natalie differentiates between talking to her parents for support and allowing them to actually provide help in solving her problems. She explains, “I might tell a parent but wouldn’t let them get in it. I would go to them for advice but would solve it myself.” Sara echoed this statement, differentiating between seeking support and needing help to actually solve the problem:

Because [my mom and sister] always support me. And sometimes I want to show them that –it’s nothing against them, like, I just don’t want them to think I always need their help because that’s not true I want to show them that I can support myself once in awhile. To show them that I’m strong – that once in awhile, I can support them.

Their support clearly meant a great deal for her, and was a powerful coping tool and source of strength; however, by not asking for additional support, Sara demonstrated that she was able to manage her own issues, and even be a source of strength for the other women in her home.

Ashlee explained that this mutual trust, love, and support were what mattered to her, regardless of whether she talked to friends or family:

like I guess you have to like trust the people that you care about like, like I love my family and I love my friends, the ones I can really trust, and like they are there for me so you have to like love a person, I guess.
Seeking support from school staff as a way to cope was brought up as well, although specific teachers, counselors or staff members were not mentioned. Girls talked generally about going to the RALLY offices for help managing stressors. Presumably, talking to the RALLY staff might be a reason for visiting this office, but this was not explicitly stated. This office suite was also a meeting place for students, so it is possible that girls were seeking support from their peers here instead of staff. Clara reported, “I have a RALLY counselor, but I haven’t met her yet.” Given that this project took place at the end of the school year, it is unclear why Clara’s counselor had not yet been identified or available to her as a support. One girl, Juliana, mentioned a formal mentor that she was assigned at her afterschool program: “I have a mentor-type person there who helps me with conflict. I can always call his cell and he will come to school.”

*Distraction with Pleasant Activities*

Distraction with pleasant activities was another theme that emerged from discussions about coping. Girls used a variety of ways to distract from stressful events, often with the stated aim of forgetting or reducing resulting distress. Isabella discussed how distraction helps her: “[When I’m stressed] I listen to music that gets me hyped up or I watch funny shows on TV to make me laugh, or I just take a nap or something, try to think of good things.” She specifically identified listening to music, watching television, and napping, three popular distraction activities in this sample. Natalie reflected nearly identical coping strategies when said she that: “to cope, I either go on the computer to chat with friends or play videogames or watch a movie, or try to go to sleep. Or, what else, maybe I read a book or listen to music. You know, have my own time.” Clara reported that she will “lay down and put some music on.”
Emotional Expression

Using emotional expression as a way to cope was the third major theme to emerge from the girls’ interviews. Many girls described allowing themselves to express their emotions in a quick burst, followed by a noticeable reduction in distress. Sara described how she expresses her emotions as a coping strategy:

When I keep it in, like if I were to hold all my stuff back, that would be a problem. Cause I used to do that a lot of times. One day I just started crying out of the blue and everyone wanted to know why I was crying...they thought I was crying for no reason...sometimes I cry for no reason, it feels like that, I don’t know why I do that.

Sometimes I feel like crying and it makes me feel better after.

For her, the purpose of crying was twofold; she felt better afterwards, and crying communicated her distress to others, perhaps allowing her to garner support or comfort. Maria said she will “scream, yell, or cry…depends on what it is.” Natalie matched her expressions to her actual emotions: “When I’m mad I will scream and cry. Sad, I just sit there and do nothing. I won’t keep it bottled up.” Isabella reported that “when I’m angry I will sometimes start crying. A lot. If I’m angry at someone I will both ignore them and be rude at the same time. I will also start shaking. I cry a lot…that will get it out of me.” Ashlee expressed her anger somewhat differently: “Like, I take my anger out sometimes on things, like I punch something I guess.”

Other Coping Strategies

The themes described above are ones that emerged across multiple interviews, with at least four girls in the study. Although distinct themes emerged, many of the girls described multiple ways that they managed stressors. However, several other identified coping strategies emerged that were not categorizable elsewhere but worth mention. One coping strategy,
particularly in response to conflict with other girls, was adopting an aloof, “I don’t care” posture.

Sara describes this coping strategy:

I don’t care what people think of me. They can go ahead and say I’m a ho or I’m a skank or…whatever…I’m a hobo, I’m a homo…I don’t care what people think of me. I’ll probably start caring if it gets out of hand but I really don’t care…they can go ahead and say what they want to say. I don’t care.

Natalie echoed similar sentiments, reporting, “I don’t really care what other people say about me. I like myself how I am. It bothers me when people run their mouths too much.” Brianna described a similar coping strategy, with the intent that others perceived her as not caring:

Even though I hate a person, um, I’m not just going to be up there rolling my eyes. I keep my energy in a level and I smile every time. Like I walk down the hallways smiling, not with a mad face or nothing. So then, what people going to think? People going to be like oh this is a chick that don’t care about nothing.

For Brianna, this ambivalent stance seemed to be both a way to manage stress and keep people distant from her emotional experiences.

Focusing on long-term goals was a way that at least one girl in the group managed her difficult daily stressors. Juliana described how this approach helps her cope with stress: “I have to set goals like try to get good grades, get good grades, leave what happened in the past in the past. Don’t doubt yourself. Root for yourself.” Natalie also endorsed this coping strategy: “You know, everything I try to achieve, I achieve it. I’m a hard worker.”

Successful coping

Clear themes about what girls defined as successful coping did not emerge clearly from interview data using the method of analysis outlined in Chapter Three. It was speculated that
girls would identify a number of coping strategies as helpful or successful, including talking to friends or adult mentors. These coping strategies were identified as ones that were used, but were not qualified by girls as successful or unsuccessful.

One relationship that did emerge from these discussions was the existence of some connections between the strengths girls attributed to themselves and some of the coping strategies they used. Girls who described their strengths in terms of others (e.g., “I’m a good friend” or “I am trustworthy”) tended to identify support-seeking coping strategies among those they used. Juliana identified her strengths as: “the way I talk to people or guide them….giving advice and being there for people.” She was one of the girls who described seeking peer support as a way to cope with stressors. Here, she provided some details illustrating ways that she uses these perceived strengths to solve a conflict:

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.

Other girls who identified similar strengths also used support-seeking coping strategies. Maria described her primary strengths as: “I’m nice, caring, trustworthy, and honest,” and noted coping by talking “to a few close friends – but all the time they have to be real. I tell them, and I am always honest with them and don’t lie to them.” Isabella listed a number of perceived strengths: “I am really good at baseball. Dancing…I would say I am an outgoing person. I like having fun, making people laugh on inside. I’m caring and helpful.” She sought support from her family as a coping strategy.
Elements of Stronglinks related to Resilience

Stronglinks was a single-sex, school based program that offered an array of activities, many rooted in expressive arts. Within this context, Stronglinks provided a diverse set of experiences, intending to appeal to different interests and strengths of the group members. At the end of the group, during final interviews, the girls discussed their experiences in the group, including things they learned, ways they changed or grew, and what they would change about the group experiences. Girls were encouraged to be candid, and reminded that their suggestions were integral to shaping future groups.

In the course of these discussions, themes emerged regarding aspects of Stronglinks that impacted girls’ perceived success in and positive engagement with the program.

Fostering or Nurturing Peer Relationships with Other Girls

The opportunity to develop relationships with other girls was discussed by nearly all participants as the most important component of Stronglinks for them. In addition to developing relationships, girls also noted that they deepened existing relationships during Stronglinks. Iris reported, “I liked it, but I didn’t learn nothing, but I got to know other people and I made friendships with people I didn’t talk to.” Despite not finding anything of particular value to her in the program’s curriculum, she still noted the benefit of new relationships that resulted from her participation. Natalie expanded on both the opportunity to both meet new people and to strengthen existing friendships: “I liked being with friends and meeting people I didn’t know that good. 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.”
One aspect of developing relationships with peers that was valuable to this group was the opportunity to hear others’ experiences and perspectives. Ashlee describes how the group broadened and changed her friendships:

I guess I grew, like hearing how other girls would do about [a situation]. I guess I learned some things I could do too. Like if [something similar] was to happen to me. So 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.

Juliana identified a similar point, describing how sharing personal information with the group has helped her friends better understand her:

I can trust the people who were in the group and knowing what they go through and them knowing what I go through, it changes our relationship as friends a lot. I feel like they know why I am acting that way and that opens a lot of doors.

Girls were also aware of the impact of these new and changing relationships on other girls. Brianna spoke about a transition she observed in another group member:

Well, I definitely learned about others. We learned some stuff that I never knew. I talked to [another group member], she’s the quietest one in the group, she actually came up to us and started to talk to us and she felt more comfortable. The next day, she was like all smiles…I know a little about her now, I invited her to the movie.

Girls identified two group factors that they felt were conducive to fostering these peer relationships. First, the fact that the group was only girls seemed to be important in being able to open up to others about sensitive topics. Second, establishing the group as a safe place was
important before serious issues could be discussed. Iris succinctly described this, stating, “it seemed confidential. And it was all girls.” Brianna expressed a similar sentiment

I think that this is a safe place to express our feelings and everything cuz we were all girls. And I think when I’m around girls I could talk more than with boys. Like we used to do this but it used to be girls and boys but I didn’t feel comfortable talking when there are guys there. Like why would I say my stuff when there’s guys? What would they think?

*Forming Positive Relationships with Adults*

Providing opportunities for mentorship was built into the design of Stronglinks. Each member of the group was paired with one of the three group leaders as an informal mentor. In addition to being present as a leader during all groups, the girl’s mentor conducted pre- and post-group interviews, and also read and responded to weekly journal entries. Developing positive relationships with group leaders was another theme that emerged in discussions with girls. Aspects of these relationships were identified as positive, and strongly conducive to good group experiences. It was clear that these relationships were important to group members, and that supportive, reciprocal interactions with adults were highly desired by the girls; however, it was also clear that the quality of the relationships with group leaders did not always meet some girls’ expectations.

Some girls described initial skepticism when introduced to group leaders, particularly when group rules and expectations were discussed in the first meetings. Sara shared her early apprehension:

Yeah, cause, I don’t know, like when I first met you, I didn’t really know. Like what if they are really mean and what if the stuff we do is boring? Then when I came in and you
guys were listening to us, our opinions, you had us write down the kind of music we wanted to hear, you guys bought us snacks, you guys make us feel comfortable, we all sat in a circle.

Being listened to and included in decision making by group leaders were integral in her growing comfort with the group, and likely in her openness to developing a relationship with facilitators. Feeling heard was important to Brianna as well, who said “I feel like you guys knew what we were talking about and that you guys listened to us.” Authenticity was another characteristic identified as important in group leaders. “You guys were nice and you really cared and you were always there to help us when we needed it,” said Maria. “Like, if we were sad, you asked what’s wrong.” The perception that adults care and notice when something is wrong were important to her in fostering relationships with group leaders. Isabella noticed that group leaders were interested and engaged during groups: “You all asked a lot of questions and laugh with us and stuff.” High levels of energy, interest, and engagement from leaders was important to Brianna also: “I like when you guys ... I love all of y’all attitudes. Like you all were always happy, I never see Amanda, Chris or you with a sad face or nothing.” However, she also reported that this was not her first impression of the leaders: “And like when you guys came out with the rules, I was like oh man. (laughs) These teachers look like they strict.”

Being able to trust group leaders, and talk to them about personal issues without judgment was crucial in developing these relationships. It was vital for girls to be able to relax, feel understood, and be themselves during group for this to happen. “I feel like I can trust you,” said Sara, “and I feel comfortable I guess. I can tell you things like you are my best friend or my sister.” The perception that group leaders understood where they were coming from was also important to girls when opening up to group leaders. Sara gave an example, stating, “you guys
didn’t put us on the spot every time we swore, cause you know that’s how kids are.” She felt as if she could talk normally, as she did to her friends and in her community in the group. Within school settings, there are sometimes consequences for being open with adults about certain topics, such as possible abuse or neglect. Juliana discussed how this has impacted her past relationships with adults in school, and how this was different for her:

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 [staff of another school program]. 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 gonna call social services if we talked about hard stuff. Like, if you tell them, “I’m not happy with my parents,” or “we get into arguments all the time, I don’t always want to go home,” or something they think you’re being abused or all this other stuff, or they think, “maybe you’ll be happier in foster care” or something. No.

Girls felt able to talk about difficult issues, “the hard stuff,” within the limits of confidentiality, and without concern of overreaction on the group leaders’ part.

Girls appreciated many aspects of the relationships they developed with leaders. However, from their discussions, it was clear they hoped for more reciprocal relationships. On this topic, Juliana commented

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 like struggles that we talked about, maybe you guys could have said, “oh, we related to it” and stuff like that.
Girls wanted to hear about the leaders’ life experiences and to hear how these adult women had managed difficulties. Natalie shared similar feedback: “not to be rude, but to talk to you, I don’t know. I can’t know y’all like that yet, don’t take this the wrong way, but y’all didn’t say nothing of your life. But yeah y’all was supportive.” This was echoed by Ashlee as well: “Like, you guys are nice people, so and you guys like, I guess you guys need to speak up more.” Girls felt safe and supported, but many hoped for more reciprocal, mutual relationships with group leaders.

**Learning Coping Skills**

Learning explicit coping skills for managing stress and other difficult life situations was third theme that emerged as a helpful component of Stronglinks. Skill development was built into the program’s curriculum in a variety of ways, usually integrated into expressive arts activities. For example, the girls did a “runes” activity, in which they selected runes that embodied some of their personal strengths, and pressed these symbols into clay pellets. Girls were taught mindfulness skills using the texture of their runes as a way to help them regulate emotions. This particular activity was brought up by many girls as one that was especially helpful for them, and one they were able to use in their lives. Juliana described her use of the runes:

> that piece of clay really helps. Knowing my struggles and who I am, just looking at that, I can be like, I need to calm down, if I touch it and think I can come down. Knowing that I made that, I looked at the anger I had in the past, and looking at it now, I already know what not to do.

Natalie also found runes, in addition to more explicit stress and anger management skills, to be helpful to her. “If I’m stressed out I can count numbers in my head and doing the runes thing, and hold them in your hand to help you think about other stuff and calm down.” These skills
were also important to Maria, who said “you don’t have to hit things like you can look at this and be reminded that you have faith and stuff. When I get mad at other people, instead I can use [the rune] I can touch it instead of yelling and screaming.” Maria spoke about using art as an outlet and way to distract from stressors in her life: [Art] made that better. “You didn’t have to focus…you didn’t have to just sit there and focus. Yeah like if you had a stressful day all you had to do was go work on your box.”

**Building Self-Esteem**

Feeling better about themselves or what they were able to accomplish was another area girls found helpful about the Stronglinks program. This was most poignantly described by Clara, who said: “I didn’t change way I act but the way feel…. like I am better than most people think I am.” Iris was impressed by her ability to complete the Hope Box, an ongoing activity in the program: “the box, I didn’t think I was going to be able to do it right, that it would be sloppy. But I took my time. It was neat.”

**Increasing Self-Knowledge**

A final theme that emerged was that girls developed increased awareness and knowledge about themselves through participation in Stronglinks. In particular, girls increased awareness of their own strengths or things they believed they needed to work on. Often, they used some of the art projects to help them demonstrate self-knowledge. Brianna described her thought process around making a Hope Box during group: “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…I put yellow to look on the bright side.” Juliana shared a similar process, in how she selected a symbol representing anger to put on clay runes:
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.

She went on to describe how she learned more about the way she changed, and what she learned about herself, as she painted her Hope Box:

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.

Quantitative Results

Participants in the Stronglinks group also completed the Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist-Revision 1, a 54-item inventory that asks girls to assign a rating of 1 through 4 (1- I would never do this to 4 – I did this most of the time) to a variety of coping strategies they used in the past month (Program for Prevention Research, 1999). Scoring of this measure produces four different coping strategies: Active Coping Strategies (which includes Problem Focused Coping and Positive Cognitive Restructuring sub-classifications); Distraction Strategies; Avoidance Strategies; and Support-Seeking Strategies. These coping strategies were calculated by finding the mean of the subscales comprising each category. The Active Coping category was obtained by calculating the mean of the two sub-categories. Definitions of all subscales and the instrument items that comprise each subscale and category are presented in Appendix B.
Means and standard deviations for both pre- and post-group subscales and categories, for both the group and for individuals, were calculated and are presented in Tables 1 through 11 in Appendix F.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary of Major Findings

This aim of this study was to explore the ways in which a group of urban adolescent girls understand and experience stress, coping, and resilience, and how participation in a school-based group contributes to resilience development. Interviews with this group of girls were analyzed to understand how concepts of stress and coping were defined and understood by participants, and integrated with quantitative data purporting to measure similar constructs. In reviewing their experiences in the Stronglinks program, girls identified aspects of the program they felt were successful and/or helpful. The girls participating in the group were generous with their time and thoughtful in their discussions, offering a rich snapshot of their lived experiences at a particular moment in time, in the context of an urban school in Boston. Results from this project hold important implications for school-based interventions with urban adolescent girls, and highlight the importance of incorporating qualitative analysis and feminist methodology into research with this population.

Experiences of Stress

Ways that girls understood stress and coping were explored in two ways: girls were asked explicitly to provide a definition for each construct, and interviews were analyzed for themes based on these definitions. This yielded rich information about stressors in the girls’ lives, and ways they managed those stressors. Overall, ways girls defined both stress and coping, were somewhat more limited than what emerged from their discussions; in other words, girls were facing more stressors and doing more things to manage these stressors than what they actually reported.
Girls tended to define stress in terms of their immediate emotional and physical experiences, describing these experiences as feeling tired, having a lot on their mind, or being aware of the presence of a negative mood state. These definitions of the experience of stress provided by participants are remarkably similar to the seminal definition of stress provide by Lazarus & Folkman (1984): the psychological or physical symptoms resulting from a perception that one’s resources have been overwhelmed.

When simply defining stress, girls tended not to identify external contributing factors or stressors, focusing instead on their own experiences. During interviews, however, girls did identify and discuss external sources of stress in their lives at length. Aspects of relationships were consistently described as difficult for this group, especially relationships with other girls. “Drama,” difficulty trusting, and feeling judged by girls were cited as particular challenges within these friendships. Family relationships provided another source of stress for many girls; relational issues raised included chaotic relationships, and stress related to managing their roles and responsibilities within their families. Relationships with boys were also stressful, primarily due, again, to “drama,” which included the impact of dating relationships on friendships. Dangerous neighborhoods were also identified as an explicit source of stress for girls, particularly in terms of witnessing violence or gang activity during everyday activities, such as walking home from school.

Life stressors that emerged from interviews are striking in that they present a different reality of life in urban America than that generally popularized by the media. Commonly cited and easily accessible statistics about urban girls, a sample of which were presented in Chapter One, point to many stressors impacting “at risk youth” living in urban environments: exposure to violence, drug use, and neglect; involvement in the legal system; racial or cultural
discrimination; inadequate housing; and poverty. These issues certainly exist within the urban neighborhood of Jamaica Plain, but girls in this sample present them in the context of their own experiences. Girls did not provide laundry lists of the stressors they faced on a daily basis, focusing instead on their emotional responses to different situations and relationships.

This is not to say that these broader stressors and issues were not present in these narratives; they were simply filtered through personal experience and described in those terms. For example, family issues identified by this group may be reflective of larger, more complicated issues such as cultural discrimination, poverty, and parental neglect. Juliana, for example, described chronic losses within her family due to deportation; while she does not explicitly label this as a stressor related to her culture, it is certainly consistent with the bi-cultural stressors described by Romero et al. (2007). Juliana experienced these bi-cultural stressors in the context of loss, and how these losses have personally impacted her and her family. Other girls discussed having to manage high levels of responsibility for siblings or household duties. This reflects a significant way that this group is impacted by poverty; higher levels of responsibility may be related to absent parents who work long hours due to financial necessity, or caring for sick parents who have inadequate health care.

Neighborhood violence did emerge as a theme, particularly how it impacted daily activities (e.g., feeling unsafe when walking home from school). Living in dangerous areas is clearly a source of stress for this sample, which is consistent with literature. It is of note, however, that when describing dangerous or unsafe situations, most girls coupled these descriptions with a statement about how they managed them. For example, girls who felt unsafe walking home after dark walked with a group, or certain known areas of violence were avoided.
The perception that all youth living in high-crime areas are victims is false; girls in this group were both aware of the problem and engaged in practical ways to protect their personal safety.

**Managing Stress: Coping Strategies**

In terms of coping strategies, there was again a difference between what girls reported when asked explicitly, “What do you currently do to help yourself manage or deal with your stress?” and coping strategies they described using in the course of interviews. The majority of girls reported using some type of distraction, such as watching TV or listening to music.

However, themes that emerged from interviews presented a richer picture of what girls actually did to manage stressful situations. These themes were: seeking support (from friends, family, and school staff); distraction with pleasant activities; and emotional expression.

One interesting, paradoxical finding that emerged was that most girls managed stress by seeking support from female friends; however, these same relationships were also identified as a significant source of stress for this group. Specific aspects of these relationships that were described as particularly stressful were: violations in trust, being judged, and managing disingenuous friends. While these issues would seem to present challenges to friendships, girls were very clear in the fact that they only talked to friends who were “real.” Mutuality appeared to be an important differential in identifying “real” friends, as girls consistently sought support from friends who, in turn, relied on them. This same contradiction emerged with family relationships; girls identified family relationships as challenging, but also sought support from family members as a common way to manage stress.

Relationships for this group of girls, then, appear to be a double-edged sword: a major source of stress and challenge, but also a vital way to get support and cope. This may simply be reflective of the complexity of relationships, that they are both deeply important for wellbeing.
and also constantly evolving, always presenting new challenges and dimensions. From a developmental context, girls are also describing age-appropriate relationship difficulties, consistent with identity development and changes in early adolescence. The fact that relationships with female friends and family members are both stressful and a way to manage stress also highlight the importance of consistent, available adult mentors. Ideally, positive mentors, particularly female ones, could provide more stable relationships for girls, a context for both growth and coping.

**Differences in Qualitative and Quantitative Data about Coping**

Data about coping strategies from qualitative and quantitative sources differed somewhat. Due to the small sample size and short time period between measurements, only descriptive statistics for the CCSC-R1 were calculated; it is highly unlikely that any significant differences between pre- and post-group data would exist. All statistics are presented in Tables 1-11 in Appendix F.

One interesting finding that emerged from the CCSC-R1 was that girls endorsed the use of Active coping strategies most frequently on both pre- and post-group measures. In this measure, Active coping is defined as using problem-focused and positive cognitive reframing strategies. Basically, this coping strategy refers to the use of internal self-talk to negotiate difficult situations and to directly solve problems. Interestingly, use of active coping strategies did not emerge as a theme from interviews, and was only discussed explicitly by two girls, Juliana and Natalie. These girls described this particular coping strategy during interviews as well as on the CCSC-R1; Juliana, for example, exemplified this strategy when she said “don’t doubt yourself….root for yourself.” One possible reason that this style was not reflected in interviews is that most girls did not necessarily view these types of thoughts or self-statements as
a specific coping strategy, or even be aware of their explicit thought process. In either case, girls would be unlikely to spontaneously report using such thoughts to cope with stressors. When cued by items providing examples of coping thoughts, such as “you told yourself that things would get better” or “you thought about which things are best to do to handle the problem,” girls may have been more likely to recognize ways they had thought about and solved problems in the past.

Avoidance was another coping strategy highly endorsed on the CCSC-R1 that did not emerge clearly from thematic analysis. While girls neither identified Avoidance as coping strategy, nor discussed it during interviews, this finding may again be related to girls not identifying the use of thoughts as a discrete coping strategy. It is also important to examine exactly how avoidant coping is being defined on this measure, particularly as such coping strategies tend to have negative connotations in psychological literature. When looking at individual means on the CCSC-R1, it appears that girls endorsed a particular Avoidance subcategory, Wishful Thinking, at higher levels. This subcategory included statements such as, “you daydreamed that everything was okay” and “you imagined how you’d like things to be.” Conceptualizing this coping strategy as avoidance is problematic; for these girls, hoping for a positive outcome and remaining future-oriented may simply be reflective of a cognitive style actually implicated in recent literature with good mental health outcomes. This finding is, for example, consistent with Landis et al. (2007), who note that this type of coping is associated with positive outcomes in urban adolescents, particularly in the face of uncontrollable stressors such as poverty or neighborhood crime. The authors point out that attempting to take an active stance with these uncontrollable global stressors may actually be counterproductive, and engender feelings of hopelessness (Landis et al., 2007). It is of note that girls also had relatively high
individual means in the related Active Coping subcategories of Optimism and Positivity, again suggesting that hope coupled with a positive outlook may be a broad cognitive style used by many girls in this group rather than a specific coping strategy used only when faced with stressors.

Thematic analysis of coping showed that support seeking, especially from friends, was a frequently used coping strategy. This was consistent with data from the CCSC-R1, where Support Seeking was endorsed highly by girls. Seeking Support for Feelings, versus seeking Support for Actions, was more highly endorsed by girls in this group, again fairly consistent with interview data. Distraction was another coping strategy endorsed by girls on both qualitative and quantitative measures; on the CSSC-R1, the Distraction category was comprised of using both physical activities, such as playing sports or riding bikes, and distraction activities, like watching TV and reading. According to the CCSC-R1 data, girls in this group tended not to use physical activities as a distraction strategy, perhaps due to limited access to sports (the Curley School did not offer physical education at the time of this project), or because the questionnaire asked about very specific activities that were either not available or not of interest to this group (e.g., skateboarding). When Physical Distraction subcategory is removed from this category, results from the CCSC-R1 are more consistent with those from thematic analysis.

One advantage of incorporating quantitative data into a project like this one is the opportunity to provide a voice to quieter members of the group. Two girls who participated in Stronglinks, Iris and Marisa, were less talkative during both interviews and group sessions. In pre- and post-group interviews, they both responded to many questions with one-word answers or “I don’t know.” Unfortunately, pre-group data from the CCSC-R1 was not obtained for Marisa, but data collected post-group indicates that she used some of the coping strategies
discussed earlier: Wishful Thinking, Avoidant Actions, and Cognitive Decision Making were her highest rated coping subscales. For Iris, Cognitive Decision Making, Seeking Understanding, Positivity, and Optimism were highest rated. It appears that Marisa and Iris use active, cognitively-oriented coping strategies to manage stressors. In addition to both girls being less vocal group participants, their endorsed coping strategies were generally not reflected in interview data.

Including both qualitative and quantitative data expanded the information obtained coping strategies used by girls in this group. Qualitative data tended to be richer, using the girls’ own words and lived experiences to convey and describe ways they are coping, and had the advantage of not being constrained by a measure. For example, the use of emotional expression as a coping strategy was absent from survey data; in fact, no items on the CCSC-R1 seemed to provide a correlate to this coping strategy. In discussions, girls were clear that they used quick emotional outbursts, either crying or screaming, to both feel better and elicit support from others. This highlights an important limitation of questionnaires: that they are necessarily limited in scope and developed from a body of research that will simply not apply to every participant. While the data may be validated and include normative data from a given population, errors of omission will certainly occur, as they did in this case.

There are also strong benefits to including quantitative measures. For example, survey data likely provided some structure to help the girls formulate their experiences, by providing concrete examples of coping that girls could recognize but may not have mentioned elsewhere. Using a mixed-methodology approach may provide more comprehensive results, and the fact that these data sets were generally consistent is a good indication of validity. In order to verify
Experience of Resilience in Stronglinks Program

this validity, all results would have ideally been shared with participants to ensure they ring true with their experiences.

Perceptions of Successful Coping

Clear themes about what girls perceived as successful coping did not emerge. This may be because girls were not specifically asked to identify unsuccessful coping strategies, and only offered things that had worked to the discussions. Asking girls directly to provide examples of unsuccessful coping would have a helpful line of questions to include in semi-structured interviews. No indication as to whether girls applied specific coping strategies to manage specific stressors emerged from discussions.

Conspicuously absent from these discussions was any mention of using drugs or alcohol, or participation in other antisocial activities (e.g., gangs) as a way to either cope or to manage social stressors. Ideally, of course, it is hoped that this information is accurate, and girls are not engaged in these activities. If some girls are, however, participating in illicit behaviors, multiple reasons why they were not reported in discussions or groups can be speculated. Particularly in pre-group interviews, it is unlikely that girls would report participation in illegal activities to unfamiliar adults in their school. It is also possible that girls would not identify using drugs or alcohol as coping strategies per se; if they were participating in such activities, they might have been seen as connected to social activities or experiences. Asking girls directly during interviews whether they had participated in drugs, alcohol, or any other illicit activities would have been a valuable inclusion to this project. Including these questions in post-group interviews, when girls had developed some relationship with facilitators, would have likely yielded more accurate information. Providing girls with an anonymous way to give information
Experience of Resilience in Stronglinks Program

about participating in illicit activities may have been an alternative way to accurately gather this data.

_Fostering Resilience through Stronglinks_

When reviewing their experiences in the Stronglinks program, girls identified several aspects of the group that contributed to their positive engagement in the program: fostering or nurturing peer relationships with other girls; fostering positive adult relationships; learning specific coping skills; building self-esteem; and increasing self-knowledge. These identified factors are closely aligned with the “5 C’s” of Positive Youth Development (PYD): Competence; Confidence; Connection; Character; and Caring/Compassion. The agreement between what girls identified as helpful or positive in Stronglinks and the integral components of PYD is an exciting finding. PYD speculates that providing opportunities to develop these factors as key in guiding youth towards healthy development; participation in Stronglinks seems to have afforded such an opportunity (Lerner, 2009). Stronglinks also appears to have successfully incorporated some of the “Big Three” components of effective programs that serve youth: activities that build life skills; opportunities to use these life skills both as group participants and as community members; and positive, sustained interactions between youths and adults (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In other words, what girls identified as important components of the Stronglinks group are closely connected to factors implicated in the development of resilience.

The opportunity to develop connections with others was clearly very important to participants in Stronglinks. This included forming new relationships with peers, strengthening existing ones, and developing positive relationships with group leaders. Lerner et al. (2009) define connection, one of the vital “5 C’s” as “positive bonds with people…that are reflected in exchanges between the individual and her peers, family, school, and community, in which both
parties contribute to the relationship” (p. 11). This definition of connection certainly matches ways that girls described changing relationships in Stronglinks. Reciprocity was often cited as an integral factor in deepening these peer relationships. Specifically, girls noted that they were able to more comfortably share information about themselves in the context of learning more about others.

These peer interactions over the course of the group provided opportunities to develop two more of the “5 C’s:” caring/compassion and competence. Caring, defined by Lerner et al. (2009) as possessing a sense of sympathy or empathy for others, was also evident in peer relationships. During interviews, girls often expressed genuine appreciation for their fellow group members, particularly in reference to challenges that others had faced, or admiration for their skills or talents. Caring was also demonstrated behaviorally, such as in reaching out to quieter group members and including them in social events outside of school.

Connections with group leaders also developed, and appeared to be an important component of the Stronglinks experience for many girls. Evident from interviews, however, is that these relationships did not entirely meet the needs and expectations of group participants. Girls who discussed these relationships often communicated appreciation for the positivity of group leaders, felt that the leaders cared about and were legitimately interested in them, and perceived leaders to be invested in letting girls be themselves. Some girls even made distinctions between the reactions of the group leaders and of other school staff, who might scold them for cursing or notify the authorities at any hint of trouble at home.

Girls clearly communicated that the relationships with group leaders lacked reciprocity, and that this was a limiting factor in the depth of these relationships. Time and again, girls noted that leaders should have been more open, particularly in terms of sharing their own experiences.
Girls were interested in knowing what challenges the group leaders had faced in their own lives, and how these had been managed. Finding a way for group leaders to appropriately self-disclose may have improved the girls’ experiences of these relationships, and provided better opportunity to foster connections. The challenge of determining what to disclose from one’s own personal history is an ongoing and complicated one for any psychologist or teacher working within a school system. What girls clearly conveyed, however, is that this type of reciprocity would have provided a way to deepen and strengthen mentorship relationships. Another challenge to the quality of these relationships was the very short duration of the group, which simply did not provide enough time for these relationships to develop naturally. Concerns raised by girls about the nature of these relationships emphasize the importance of Roth and Brooks-Gunn’s (2003) assertion that successful school programs will include interactions with adults that are not only positive, but are sustained over time.

All social interactions that occurred during the Stronglinks group provided opportunities for the development of another PYD factor: competence. Defined as a “positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, health, and vocational,” social competence specifically refers to the development and positive regard for one’s interpersonal skills. Each group session provided the multiple occasions for girls to develop and practice this competency; growing mastery was evidenced when girls described using these skills outside of sessions. Providing opportunities for interpersonal skill development is especially critical for a group that encountered many challenges in relationships, and it is hoped that these skills will increase both the quality of friendships and the success of support-seeking coping. Finally, girls identified learning explicit skills, such as stress management and expressive art techniques, as helpful as well, which also ties in with competence development.
Data from this project emphasize one thing with certainty: relationships are extremely important to the girls in this group. From a feminist, relational-cultural model, the clear emphasis on relationships that emerged from this project is not surprising. These theories posit that growth occurs in the context of relationships, particularly ones that emphasize mutuality and connection. This was clearly demonstrated in this project; the girls struggled and felt stressed when their relationships were difficult, and found comfort and strength when they were supportive and reciprocal. Girls worked hard to maintain their relationships, to make sense out of them, and to connect with others in spite of many challenges. Seeking relationships was important to girls in this group, and persistent investment in relationships was a clear strength of many group members: girls continued to invest in relationships and view them as helpful, even after negative experiences.

Relationships seem to be an important part of resilience, and participation in positive, sustained relationships is likely integral to development. The importance of relationships is being incorporated into newer developmental theories, such as PYD, but viewing connection with others as a specific factor that facilitates development is fairly new. Traditional theories of development continue to focus largely on individual factors, and measure successful development in terms of achievements and milestones; when one fails to meet these markers, the implication is that some personal deficit exists. The alternative explanation, that the model may not fit that particular individual, is not often considered. Perhaps because relationships are traditionally emphasized by woman or by collectivist, non-dominant cultural groups, their value has been neglected when considering ways that people develop, grow, and thrive.
Ecological Implications

The degree that this group valued relationships is not a surprising finding, but it is one that has broad implications for how these girls will fare as they negotiate systems grounded in traditional, dominant cultural values. A feminist ecological analysis is important in exploring the scope of these implications. As discussed, relationship development for this group of girls appears to be both a strength and possible factor in fostering resilience. For these girls, various individual dimensions, including social, cognitive, emotional, and creative, have the potential to change in the context of relationships with peers and adults. Individual and microsystem level analysis is somewhat consistent with a relational-cultural perspective, particularly in considering ways that girls interact with members of their families, communities, and neighborhoods; these interactions have the potential to yield strong relationships that facilitate concurrent development. In addition, many of these interactions, particularly those with family, friends and neighborhood, may be consistent with a girl’s individual and cultural values.

Even at this microsystem level of analysis, however, some troubling interactions begin to emerge. The profound exosystem and macrosystem influences are clear and salient, even in the daily interactions girls have with familiar systems and institutions. An exploration of the girls’ neighborhood schools demonstrates the multiple levels of interaction and influence at work. The Curley School, for example, is a culturally diverse neighborhood school located within an urban neighborhood. Despite this diverse student body, this school is very much a part of the American public school system. Within this larger system, success is measured in terms of academic achievement, as determined by letter grades. Decision making about what constitutes an acceptable grade is made with a belief that using such a system is a valid way of to measure learning and knowledge. Learning requires more than just intellectual capacity, however. It
necessitates that students have access to academic resources (e.g., books, calculators), time to complete homework requirements, the ability to attend to classroom instruction and comply with classroom rules, and that material will be presented in a way and in a language that students can understand. Even material that is taught in the classroom is reflective of mainstream values, where empirical and rational theories are weighted heavily. Schools across the country, including Massachusetts, are increasingly measuring both individual and school-wide performance with standardized tests; the use of these instruments introduces questions about whether they were developed and standardized with a diverse population.

With each level of analysis, it becomes increasingly evident that what is valued by schools (achievement, compliance, empirical knowledge) diverges significantly from what girls in this group valued (relationships, connection, experience, self-knowledge). In reality, these girls must learn to negotiate a world that where success is defined in ways run counter to their values and norms, and in a sense, learn to play a game where the rules are in a different language. Nondominant groups are silenced and disenfranchised by the very systems within which they exist. Major institutional overhauls are desperately needed, but unlikely to occur soon in any meaningful way. Feminist therapy navigates this reality in part with consciousness-raising, and programs that aim to build resilience should take this cue. Raising awareness about power and privilege, helping girls negotiate an unjust world, and helping them identify places where they can engender real social and systematic change are worth including in future programming, and may be integral in developing resilient girls who grow into strong women.
Limitations of the Study

There are several important limitations of this study that must be addressed, including sample size, project development and methodology issues, researcher bias, approaches used for data verification, and general cultural factors.

The very small sample size of this project, with just eleven girls participating in the final group, is an obvious limitation, and one that significantly limits the generalizability of these results. The homogeneity in this group, both in terms of age, grade, neighborhood, and ethnicity, is another factor limiting broader generalizability of results; expanding this group to other grades, schools, and communities would have been an ideal way to improve generalizability, had the necessary resources been available. The intent of this project, however, was not to develop an intervention that would be generalizable and widely applicable; rather, it was to apply feminist methodology to explore the experiences of a small group of girls and to provide them with a voice throughout the process.

When developing this project, the researchers worked within the constraints of a public school system. This system imposed some unforeseen challenges on project design that ultimately impacted the quality of the program. Originally, the Stronglinks group was designed as two-hour long groups that would take place over twelve weeks, a period of time hoped to be sufficient to for relationship development and the inclusion of a broad range of activities. This included some afterschool sessions with a focus on community activism project. However, with very little notice, the school notified researchers that this twelve week time period would be reduced, and that only an hour could be allotted to groups. Changes were made, and two weeks were shaved from the group curriculum, with two afterschool groups being added. However,
due to the unplanned elimination of a late afternoon bus route, afterschool groups also had to be removed from the curriculum.

As a result, many planned activities were eliminated. In the hopes of including as much as possible, group time was somewhat overscheduled, and the frenetic pace may have limited opportunities for relationship development. Researchers also had far less time to coordinate individual pre-group interviews than anticipated, which resulted in not having enough time to obtain consent to audiotape these interviews from Boston Public Schools. Errors were likely made while transcribing these interviews live, potentially damaging the validity of qualitative data. This researcher had intended to include another questionnaire, which asked girls to identify stressful situations they had faced; very specific situations, such as engagement in sexual activity, using drugs or alcohol, and witnessing violence, were included. Unfortunately, the IRB believed that asking about these types of stressors may induce psychological distress in participants, and did not approve the use of this measure. Due to time constraints, an appropriate substitute was not found. Gathering this detailed information about a variety of stressors faced by girls would have been an interesting addition to this project, particularly as another point of comparison between qualitative and quantitative data.

These challenges reflect the difficulty of conducting research in community settings, and better anticipating these obstacles will be an important consideration in future research. The schedule changes, consent issues, and even access to a group of girls for the study all point to issues of institutional power within the school system. As is frequently the case, the needs of certain stakeholders, in this case, the Curley School and the Boston Public School system, took precedence over needs of the researchers and certainly over the needs of girls in this groups. Involvement in this process provided valuable experiential data for researchers, who came to
better understand the challenges of navigating a system in which you have limited power and control.

Issues of researcher bias and data verification should also be considered as limitations to project results. While there were three researchers involved in program development and implementation, each analyzed data independently, limiting opportunities for peer review with others having experience with the data set and knowledge of the participants. Independent peer reviews of data and conclusions from thematic analysis were used to verify qualitative data, but doing this in a more thorough and systematic way, with other stakeholders, would have strengthened project results. Ideally, conclusions would have been verified with group participants as well, to ensure that they fit with their own life experiences. Unfortunately, this was not possible given the timing of the group at the end of the school year, and the fact that many of them moved on to other schools.

Finally, cultural issues between group leaders and participants were likely a limitation. Given that this group was composed of Latina girls, most of who were bilingual and non-native English speakers, the fact that none of the leaders spoke Spanish presents a serious concern. Giving girls the option of speaking Spanish may have increased their comfort level and improved their experiences in the group. The cultural mis-match between participants and group leaders, who were all white, middle-class women, is also important to acknowledge as a limitation. Girls may have had difficulty relating to or identifying with leaders. Issues of power and privilege were likely introduced that may have been less salient with group leaders of color.

**Directions for Future Research**

Despite these significant limitations, results from this project still have important implications for future inquiry and program development with youth in urban schools. This
project provides valuable information about what adolescent girls living in an urban neighborhood identify as stressful, ways they are coping with these stressors, and aspects of a school-based program with which they resonated. Results are largely based on qualitative data, providing participants with a voice that is too-often neglected in research with urban adolescent girls. This type of data is important in understanding the daily lives of a population about which many negative and biased assumptions are made.

School-Based Program Development

This project underscores the importance of developing school-based, youth-focused programs that are widely available and accessible to students. When identifying what was personally helpful or important to them in Stronglinks, girls’ responses were very consistent with the “5 C’s” outlined as crucial factors for PYD. This finding is significant in that it establishes a relationship between factors implicated in literature as key to positive development, and the factors participants understood as applicable to their own lives.

Providing opportunities for youth to engage in activities and relationships that promote these competencies is critical, and school is an ideal place to provide them. School is a setting where children spend a tremendous amount of time, and a place where social, developmental, and academic spheres naturally intersect. It is also a place where students come into contact with multiple stressors, including turbulent peer relationships; nurturing these relationships is an important way for youth to develop important competencies. Developing programs in a school setting also increases opportunities for youth to build positive, sustained relationships with adults. The Stronglinks program also demonstrated the potential to develop some positive youth competencies in a very short period of time at little cost. This project makes a strong argument
for continued development of curricula like Stronglinks that can be readily applied in school settings with little cost or specialized leader training.

Qualitative inquiry is important to include in program development because it offers insight into the issues, concerns, and daily lives of the targeted population. It is vital to understand the issues specific to the community and school, and incorporate these into programs. Use of methodology like PAR can certainly be time intensive and complicated, but it can help develop more focused interventions, help researchers avoid making assumptions about the needs of a population, and offer participants a role as stakeholders in these programs.

This project also investigated the types of stressors encountered by a group of urban adolescent girls, and explored ways that girls managed these stressors. Future projects expanding the nature of these stressors, with a larger sample and in different communities, will help broaden the understanding of stressors faced by adolescents in urban America. More information about these stressors, and coping strategies used to manage them, will be helpful in targeting interventions that strengthen what girls are already doing to cope. In particular, meeting the needs of Latino youth will be crucial in the coming years; according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), by 2050, the Latino population is estimated to be the largest minority group. Exploring singular ways that members of this group perceive stressors and cope with them is an important future direction for research. Although it was on a small scale, this project also explored some differences between data from quantitative and qualitative sources. Examining both where these data types differ and where they are consistent is a fascinating topic for future inquiry.
Conclusions

The construct of resilience, then, seems to be broader than merely a personal quality or characteristic that a child either has or lacks. This limited perspective simply does not seem to adequately fit the experiences of children who are doing well in struggling schools or neighborhoods. However, girls who participated in Stronglinks are generally doing well in the face of many challenges. Their descriptions of their daily struggles, stressors, and ways they manage provide personal narratives about ways they experience the world and survive it using their strengths and growing within the context of complicated relationships. As participants in Stronglinks, they communicated their experiences and told us what they needed and wanted out of relationships, support systems, and school programs. Through their voices, much can be learned about resilience and interventions aimed at nurturing it; unfortunately, it also is clear that girls interact within systems that emphasize different, often contradictory, value systems.

Resilience seems best conceptualized as the interaction between systems, each offering children a different opportunity for growth, change, and development. Even in low SES schools and communities, it appears that simply providing opportunities for positive interactions can have tremendous contributions to youth development. Current research and results from this project indicate that there are opportunities across domains and within different systems for intervention; it seems there are always opportunities to foster the positive interactions and experiences that contribute to resilient youth.
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Appendix A

Northeastern University Division of Research Integrity
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Department of Counseling and Applied Educational Psychology

Name of Investigators:
Mary Ballou, Ph.D., Christina Tortolani, M.A., Amanda Allen, MS.Ed, Lindsay Amper, M.Ed.


We are inviting your daughter to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, and a researcher will explain it to you as well. You may ask this person any questions that you have. Participation is voluntary and your daughter is free to discontinue participation at any time.

Why is my daughter being asked to take part in this research study? We are asking your daughter to be in this study because she is a female middle school student in an urban school who has agreed to participate in a program that is being designed for girls her age.

Why are you doing this research study? The purpose of this research is to better understand how girls your daughter’s age handle stress, perceive relationships, and enjoy and benefit from the use of the arts in an after school program.

What will she be asked to do? If your daughter decides to take part in this study, she will be asked to fill out questionnaires, surveys and to participate in several interviews. The questionnaires, surveys, and interviews will focus on questions around coping, stress; feelings about relationships with friends, family, other adult women; and her experiences in the after school program. Some interview questions will ask her to talk about what the art that you made represents to her.

Where will this take place and how much of her time will it take? She will be asked to fill out a questionnaire at the end of each group. Additional surveys and questionnaires will be used at different points in the group and will occur after school. The interviews will be scheduled several times throughout the course of the program with one of the researchers and will also happen during school. This will all happen in the school.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to her? There are no known risks to your daughter for taking part in this study. However, if she ever feels uncomfortable with any of the questions that are being asked, it is okay for her to refuse to answer them.
Will she benefit by being in this research? We hope that she will benefit from participating in the school program. We also hope that by participating in the research she will feel like she has been able to have an impact on future programs for girls your age.

Who will see the information about her? Her identity as a participant in this study will only be known by the three researchers and program designers. That means that only the researchers will know her answers. RALLY personnel will only have access to your information once it has been coded with a number. Any research assistants that are involved with the project will also only see the coded number and not the names on the surveys, questionnaires, and interview answers. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms (false names) to identify individual participants.

If she does not want to take part in the study, what choices does she have? If your daughter chooses not to participate in the study, she can still participate in the group but should not sign the consent form.

Your daughter’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. She does not have to participate if she does not want to. Even if she begins the study, she may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems? If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Lindsay Amper at (redacted), Christina Tortolani at (redacted), or Amanda Allen at (redacted)

Who can I contact about my daughter’s rights as a participant? If you have any questions about your daughter’s rights as a participant, 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.

Will my daughter be paid for my participation? No.

Will it cost her anything to participate? No.

Parent’s Name: _____________________________________________________

Parent’s Signature: __________________________________________________

Date: __________
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
RALLY Permission Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

The RALLY program has been a huge success at the Curley in the past and I’m happy we have the opportunity to work with practitioners again this year. I hope you will complete the permission slip below and return it to your child’s homeroom teacher as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jeffery Slater
Principal of the Curley

As legal parent/guardian, I give permission for RALLY practitioners to work with my child, ____________________________.

I give permission for my child to receive individual academic and/or social support from a RALLY practitioner during the school day. __yes __no

I give permission for RALLY staff to work with my child in small groups for academic and/or social support. __yes __no

I give permission for RALLY staff to review my child’s school records (including grade and behavior reports, standardized test scores, and any special education records). __yes __no

I understand that my child will be asked to fill out questionnaires to help RALLY staff understand his/her strengths, interests and needs. __yes __no

I give permission for my child to be included in pictures at RALLY events. __yes __no

I give permission for RALLY staff to contact other adults who work with my child (i.e. afterschool providers, counselors, doctors) and share information that might help my child. __yes __no

Contact phone numbers for parent/guardian:

Home _____________ Cell _____________

Work _____________ Other _____________
RALLY Formulario de Permiso

Estimado Padre/o persona encargada:

El Programa de RALLY ha tenido gran éxito en la escuela Mary E. Curley en el pasado y estoy muy contento de que tengamos la oportunidad de trabajar con las practicantes este año otra vez. Espero que pueda completar el permiso que esta en la parte de abajo de esta y lo devuelva inmediatamente al salon hogar de su hijo/a.

Atentamente,

Sr. Jeffery Slater
Principal de la escuela Mary E. Curley

Como persona encargada legalmente, doy permiso a las practicantes del Programa de RALLY para que trabajen con mi hijo/a: ________________________________.

Doy permiso para que mi hijo/a reciba apoyo individual académico y/o apoyo individual para que se desenvuelva mejor social durante el día escolar por medio del Programa de RALLY. ___si  ___no

Doy permiso para que los miembros del Programa RALLY trabajen con mi hijo/a en pequeños grupos académicos y/o apoyo para que se desenvuelva mejor socialmente. ___si  ___no

Doy permiso para que los miembros del Programa RALLY puedan tener acceso a los archivos académicos (incluyendo los reportes de sus notas y de su comportamiento, resultados de los exámenes estandarizados, e información sobre educación especial (en caso de que haya alguno). ___si  ___no

Yo entiendo que los miembros del Programa RALLY van a pedirle a los niños que participen en un questionario para ayudarnos a entender más y cuales son las destrezas fuertes o debiles, intereses y necesidades.

Doy permiso para que a mi hijo/a se le puedan tomar fotografías en las actividades del Programa de RALLY.

Doy permiso para que los miembros del Programa de RALLY se pongan en contacto con otras personas que trabajen con su hijo/a (ejemplo: programas después de la escuela, consejeros, doctores) y que compartan información que pueda ayudar a mi hijo/a.

Contactos: Números de teléfono de los padres/o persona encargada:
DEFINITIONS FOR THE DIMENSIONS ON THE CHILDREN'S COPING STRATEGIES CHECKLIST-REVISION 1 (CCSC-R1)
(Program for Prevention Research, 1999)

ACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Problem focused Coping

Cognitive Decision Making: Planning or thinking about ways to solve the problem

Direct Problem Solving: Efforts to improve the problem situation

Seeking Understanding: Efforts to find meaning in a problem situation or try to understand it better

Positive Reframing Coping

Positive Thinking: Thinking about the good things that happened.

Optimistic Thinking: Thinking about things in the future with a optimistic manner

Control: Thinking that you can handle or deal with the problem or whatever happens

DISTRACTION STRATEGIES

Physical Release of Emotions: Efforts to physically work off feelings with physical exercise, play or efforts to physically relax

Distracting Actions: Efforts to avoid thinking about the problem situation by using distracting stimuli, entertainment or some distracting activity

AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Avoidant Actions: Efforts of avoiding the problem by staying away from it or leaving it

Repression: Repressing thinking of problems

Wishful Thinking: Using wishful thinking or imaging the problem was better

SUPPORT SEEKING COPING STRATEGIES

Support for Actions: The use of other people as resources to assist in seeking solutions to
the problem situation. This includes seeking advice or information or direct task assistance

Support for Feelings: The involvement of other people in listening to feelings or providing understanding to help the person be less upset

Items for the CCSC-R1 are grouped by their subscales/dimensions and also by the larger factors on which they have loadings. The four major factors are in CAPITALS and BOLD text. The Active Coping Strategies dimension has two sub-classifications that have occasionally been utilized and are titled in bold and upper and lower case text. The subscales/dimensions are in titled simply in underlined and normal text.

ACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Problem Focused Coping

Cognitive Decision Making (CDM)

You thought about what you could do before you did something.
You thought about what would happen before you decided what to do.
You thought about what you needed to know so you could solve the problem.
You thought about which things are best to do to handle the problem.

Direct Problem Solving (DPS)

You tried to make things better by changing what you did.
You did something to make things better.
You did something in order to get the most you could out of the situation.
You did something to solve the problem.

Seeking Understanding (SU)

You thought about what you could learn from the problem.
You tried to understand it better by thinking more about it.
You thought about why it happened.
You tried to figure out why things like this happen.

Positive Cognitive Restructuring

Positivity (POS)

You tried to notice or think about only the good things in your life.
You reminded yourself that you are better off than a lot of other kids.
You reminded yourself that overall things are pretty good for you.
You reminded yourself about all the things you have going for you.
Control (CON)

You reminded yourself that you knew what to do.
You told yourself you could handle what ever happens.
You told yourself you have taken care of things like this before.
You told yourself that you could handle this problem.

Optimism (OPT)

You told yourself that it would be OK.
You told yourself that in the long run, things would work out for the best.
You told yourself that things would get better.
You told yourself that it would work itself out.

DISTRACTION STRATEGIES

Distracting Actions (DA)

You listened to music.
You watched TV.
You did something like video games or a hobby.
You read a book or magazine.
You went for a walk.

Physical Release of Emotions (PRE)

You did some exercise.
You played sports.
You went bicycle riding.
You went skateboard riding or roller-skating.

AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Avoidant Actions (AVA)

You tried to stay away from the problem.
You avoided it by going to your room.
You avoided the people who made you feel bad.
You tried to stay away from things that made you feel upset.

Repression (REP)

You just forgot about it.
You tried to ignore it.
You didn't think about it.
You tried to put it out of your mind.

**Wishful Thinking (WISH)**

You wished that things were better.  
You wished that bad things wouldn't happen.  
You imagined how you'd like things to be.  
You daydreamed that everything was okay.

**SUPPORT SEEKING STRATEGIES**

**Support for Actions (SUPA)**

You told others how you would like to solve the problem.  
You talked to someone who could help you solve the problem.  
You told other people what you wanted them to do.  
You talked to someone who could help you figure out what to do.  
You told other people what you would like to happen.

**Support for Feeling (SUPF)**

You talked about your feelings to someone who really understood.  
You told other people what made you feel the way you did.  
You let other people know how you felt.  
You told people how you felt about the problem.
Appendix C

Strong Links Curriculum

Each group will begin with music, snacks and check-ins. Each group will end with check-outs & journal entries. Groups take place between 2:30PM – 3:20PM.

Framework:

Weeks 1: Assent process, Norm/Rule setting, & Team building

Weeks 2 & 3: Focus on girls’ RELATIONSHIPS with peers & family

Weeks 4 & 5: Focus on girls’ MEANINGFUL EVENTS, goal setting, being assertive and proactive

Weeks 6 & 7: Focus on girls’ developing sense of SELF (cultural, historical, future goals for oneself)

Weeks 8 & 9: Focus on girls’ plan, VISION for future, summarization of learning and closure
Week 1 – April 29th

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 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

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.

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: Stronglinks. String bead. One bead for the group dynamic & one of
their choice. Take the stronglink with them every week as a reminder of what they
learned. Introduce StrongLinks – what you learned from this group (how do you connect
family, friends, community).
Week 2 – May 6th

2:30-2:45 Music, snacks, check-in, hopebox – introduce the idea and give 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, 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 other’s boundaries, and work together towards a common goal. Discussion linked to what it’s 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.

**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.

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

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 led up to it? What did they experience/feel? What did they do? How did it turn out? 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.

**Learning Goals:** Introduce 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.

Week 3 – May 13th

*Theme:* RELATIONSHIPS with family: mutuality  
*RALLY Goal:* BELONGING

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hopebox
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.

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.

Week 4 – May 20th

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS
RALLY Goal: REFLECT

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-in, hopebox

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 and then we will present all of the topics to the girls and have them vote.

3:10-3:20 Journal

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.
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?

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.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hopebox

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.

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 other’s 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.

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?

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.

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hopebox

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.

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 other’s 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.

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?

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.

2:30-3:00 Present their project

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 other’s 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.

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)
Week 8 – Afterschool/ Date TBA*

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, hopebox)
2:45-3:
Activity: “My Story/ Lifemap”-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 former Curley student, to come in and talk about her lifemap.

Week 9 – Afterschool/ Date TBA*

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

RALLY Goal: Activity:

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

2:45-3: 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.

3-3:20
Affirmations: Each girl writes a note of affirmation to each girl, which we will add to their Hopebox.

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.

Week 10 - Afterschool/ Date TBA*

Theme: SELF & EMPOWERMENT
RALLY Goal: REFLECTION.

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”

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.

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.

*due to scheduling changes, these group sessions did not occur
Appendix D

Pre-Group Semi-Structured Interview Template

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/history 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? Tell me about a time you think you handled it well?

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 E

Post-Group Semi-Structured Interview Template

Hopebox Project

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

2. What did [the group leaders] say about doing this particular project?

3. What was it like for you to work on this?

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 POD, do you feel that you have changed/grown in any way from this experience?

7. What does [this artwork, piece of writing, drama activity, etc] say about who you are as a person? A girl? A middle school student?

8. What are you most proud of re: this [this artwork, piece of writing, drama activity, etc]?

9. Was this activity a useful way for you to work on some of the issues surrounding [this artwork, piece of writing, drama activity, etc]?

10. This is my interpretation of [this artwork, piece of writing, drama activity, etc] and how I feel about you as a member of the group. What do you think of my interpretation? Is it correct? Wrong? Close?

Group Satisfaction Questions

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

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

13. 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?

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

15. What did the facilitators do that you liked? Disliked?
16. Would you participate in a program like this again? Why or why not?

Relationships

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

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

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

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

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

Group Experience

22. Tell me about your experience in this program. What has it been like for you?

23. What were you like before you started this program? Have you changed at all in your thinking, behavior, actions etc.?

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

25. At the beginning of this program you described yourself as:[refer to initial interview], would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

26. At the beginning of the program, you said that you struggled with [refer to initial interview] and were good at [refer to initial interview]. Would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

27. At the beginning of the program, you stated the following about your interest and perceived strength/weakness in the arts [refer to initial interview]. Would you say that has changed or stayed the same?

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

29. 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?
30. 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?

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

32. 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?

33. How do you usually express/show anger?

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

35. When things are bothering you, how do you usually deal with it? Do you talk about it?
Appendix F
CCSC-R1 Descriptive Statistics

GROUP MEANS

TABLE 1
Pre-group CCSC-R1 Subscale Group Means & Standard Deviations

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TABLE 7
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### INDIVIDUAL MEANS

#### TABLE 8

**Individual CCSC-R1 Subscale Pre-Group Means**

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#### TABLE 9

**Individual CCSC-R1 Category Pre-Group Means**

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TABLE 11
Individual CCSC-R1 Category Post-Group Means

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