STRONGLINKS:
A MIXED METHODS STUDY EXPLORING URBAN ETHNIC GIRLS’ EXPERIENCES, CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

A
DISSERTATION

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Christina C. Tortolani, M.A.

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study explores the relationships and social connections of urban middle school girls who participated in a strength-based, participatory action program - StrongLinks. It was developed under the framework of an existing youth program, Responsive Advocacy of Life and Learning (RALLY). The StrongLinks program was also evaluated as a secondary aim of this dissertation project. The participants were 11 urban adolescent girls from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The quantitative component of this project included an analysis of pre and post-group scores on two instruments developed from the foundations of the Relational Cultural Theory - the Relational Health Indices and the Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire. The qualitative component included information collected through researcher observation, notes, group materials and pre and post-group semi-structured interviews with the girls. The quantitative results did not indicate the girls’ participation in the StrongLinks curriculum increased levels of relational competence or perceived mutuality in their relationships. The qualitative portion of the data, however, indicated other meaningful aspects of relational growth, knowledge and awareness. The present research findings demonstrate how girl-centered, strength-based and feminist methodologies can offer a “body of research” that is reflective of a group of urban girls’ experiences and relationships. By developing programs with girls to support them, their voices can become more prominent and understood in policy, research, and practice.
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Completing this dissertation has been a journey- one that began many years ago when I was a young girl learning the value of relationships. And since then, I have been fortunate to have many people in my life who have shaped both who I am and how I think about relationships. At the core of my belief system are the nurturing connections of my loving family - without your love, support, patience and sacrifice, this work would not have been possible. Mom and Dad, you have given me the best gift of all- the confidence and self-worth to believe I can accomplish my dreams. And because of you, I have.

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CHAPTER 1

This mixed-methods study explored the relationships and social connections of urban middle school girls who participated in a strength-based, participatory action program—StrongLinks. It was developed under the framework of an existing youth program, Responsive Advocacy of Life and Learning in Youth (RALLY). The StrongLinks program was also evaluated as a secondary aim of this dissertation project. This chapter begins with a brief background of the research, followed by the rationale and significance of the problem and an overview of the theoretical basis. Additionally, the major research questions studied, the statement of the problem and the study’s purpose and potential benefits will be stated. Lastly, definition of variables to be investigated will be identified.

Background of the Problem

Over the last several decades, traditional, male-centered theories of developmental psychology (e.g., Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg) have been challenged to include the voices and experiences of young girls and women. Gilligan and colleagues (1982) contested this absence by offering alternative, feminist perspectives to include girls’ psychological health and development. This emergence of research signified a paradigm shift in what became known as “the girls’ movement.” Peaking in the 1990s, it resulted in theory, policy and practice that integrated girls’ strengths and strategies of resistance to cultural conventions of femininity and power (Leadbeater & Way, 2007). This new trajectory incorporated the voices of girls and women into developmental theory and practice.

However, it soon became apparent that this voice did not include all girls equally. A majority of the early research was conducted on white, middle class, suburban girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992a; Gilligan, 1982; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995), with limited attention paid
to the experiences of urban girls from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Earlier studies that were conducted centered on urban girls’ (and boys) vulnerabilities, adversities and risk factors (Campbell, 1984; Dash, 1989; Dembo & Shern, 1982; Fine, 1991; Gross & McCaul, 1990; Hein, Cohen, & Litt, 1980). Several key researchers responded by positing that this problem-oriented framework created a significant gap in the understanding, development and subsequent programming of urban girls of color (Leadbeater & Way, 2007; Lerner, 2000).

Some studies have since shifted their focus to assess positive youth development by exploring the strengths cultivated by the girls’ cultures and acknowledging each girl’s history of resistance within dominant society (Lerner, 2006; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002; T. Robinson & Ward, 1991). By recognizing the girls’ strengths alongside their vulnerabilities, a more complete and authentic reflection of urban girls’ development in the context of their class and race was created. Consequently, girls’ programming began to have a much stronger relevance to girls’ personal narratives.

Contemporary feminist and developmental researchers are committed to viewing girls from a perspective that captures a more contextual, community framework that considers such components as family, relationships, racial identity, patterns of socialization, acculturation and social and economic realities, among others. This ecological frame of reference places the cultural and sociopolitical aspects of urban girls’ lives as central to acknowledging and understanding the oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement they may experience. This, in turn, allows a dialogue that can incorporate and develop girls’ critical consciousness and ultimately lead to a sense of empowerment and social action initiatives.
While knowledge of girls’ identity development in the contexts of adversity is still limited (Leadbeater & Way, 2007), there have been continued and persistent efforts among groups of researchers to explore the lives, coping and resistance of girls from urban communities while recognizing the critical importance of ethnic and economic differences among girls. This type of research has and continues to inform the development of programs and by doing so, helps urban girls navigate the multiple and complex meanings of their life circumstances and events such as violence, poverty and non-dominant status that disproportionately effect them.

Rationale and Significance of Problem

Importance of girls’ programs

Members of the Girls’ Coalition of Greater Boston (Wheeler, Oliveri, Deshmukh Towery, & Mead, 2005) recently published a report that explores and identifies the trends, gains and gaps in Boston girls’ out-of-school time programming today. It speaks to the necessity of single-sex girls’ programming that are designed to parallel girls’ unique pathways through adolescence while providing safe spaces for them to explore inequities and critically deconstruct the messages that are put forth by the media and society. Such an opportunity encourages and demands a sociopolitical analysis where girls can begin to reframe and understand their experiences.

Adolescence is marked as a developmental trouble zone where girls “self silence” and take their knowledge underground in the face of patriarchal culture and demands placed on them (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). However, Ward (1996) proposed that this self-silencing effects girls from racial minorities much differently. Similarly, Way (1995) found that urban girls speak their minds with “ordinary courage”- a term Annie Rogers (1990) described as “speaking one’s mind with all one’s heart,” in relationships with friends, parents and teachers. Thus, urban girls are
socialized to not be passive or quiet like many white girls are, but to actively protect and safeguard their personal dignity.

Additionally, mentorship, often through the adult facilitators and “othermothers” (Lopez & Lechuga, 2007), peer connections, shared responsibility and power as well as an overall atmosphere of respect and trust contribute to establishing growth-fostering relationships that can serve as powerful sources of resiliency within these programs. Furthermore, the Coalition asserts these out-of-school time programs often fill a role that other institutions (e.g., schools, community centers) are failing to provide and by participating in the programs, the girls are given this opportunity for new learning and self-examination (2005).

**Gaps and needs in girls’ programming**

Within the current programming, researchers have identified key aspects of girls’ experiences that are often left unaddressed (Wheeler, et al., 2005). Programming on girls’ health issues is a recognized area that needs additional focus, including relational aggression and other forms of violence, negative images in the media, a lack of health education, self-harming behaviors and isolation and identity issues. Additionally, some research supports that involving girls in the planning and development of programs may help strengthen their character, enhance their self-worth and validate their individual experiences (Lind, 2005). The participating girls were asked to play an active role in StrongLink’s development, with the intention of fostering a strong sense of ownership and connection. Future programming also needs to incorporate a critical consciousness and social justice perspective to help girls move beyond their voices to processing, planning and taking action.

Developers and advocates of girls’ programming recognize that certain populations of girls are often left out of after-school programs (Wheeler, et al., 2005) Underserved groups of
girls include those of immigrant and/or low-income status, GLBTQ girls, those sexually-exploited and/or harassed, black girls and girls in the juvenile justice system. Conversations on race, ethnicity and sexuality are integral topics that need to be incorporated in acknowledging and exploring the multifaceted identities of these girls. Within-group diversity also needs to be considered as researchers may erroneously assume that all urban youth are “characterized either as ‘at-risk’ or as already engaged in problematic or health compromising behaviors” (Lerner, Phelps, Alberts, Forman, & Christiansen, 2007a, p. 20) and from this critical perspective, diversity should not be equated with deficit.

**Threats to girls’ programs**

There has been a recent shift in federal programming to re-focus on boys (who are perceived as doing academically poorer than girls). As a result, funding opportunities for girls’ programs have become limited (Wheeler, et al., 2005). The attention and priority is now on co-ed programs that often do not integrate gender specific components. It seems the sociopolitical standpoint is to focus on only one gender at a time, creating a “boys against the girls” dichotomy (Wheeler, et al., 2005). With competition for scarce resources, programs are often not funded and therefore, not implemented. There is limited money to measure the potential impact of programs, yet studies (e.g., Girls’ Circle, Full of Ourselves) show evidence that these programs are sources of support, nourishment and safe places for girls to explore themselves (Roa, Irvine, & Cervantez, 2007; Steiner-Adair & Sjostrom, 2006). Such lack of funding has a devastating effect on the research process of collecting data on young girls and further impacts the pathway that produces results and change in policy and programming.
Theoretical Review of Problem

Relational psychology was developed from the women’s movement. It worked to bring egalitarianism into psychology by questioning traditional conceptions of difference and relationship. Rooted in feminism, researchers deconstructed the politics of relationships and the politics of dominance within the psychological theory of development (Robb, 2006). Jean Baker Miller’s (1976) relational- cultural theory (RCT), suggests that growth-fostering relationships are a central human necessity and chronic disconnections (self-fragmentation) are the source of psychological problems. This new model of psychological development emphasized women's attributes of relatedness, empathy and nurturance, which previously were devalued by male-dominated theorists.

Core foundational ideas include relational differentiation and elaboration, rather than separation and independence as the marker of psychological growth in addition to mutuality and shared power as representative of healthy relational functioning. Miller holds that relational skills increase one’s sense of self-worth, vitality and validation as well as enhancing knowledge of self and others and a desire for further connection. Moreover, relational cultural theory extends beyond the individual and familial level to sociocultural levels as well. Disconnections arise when power differentials of dominance and privilege suppress the authenticity and mutuality in relationships. Silence, shame and isolation in marginalized groups result from such sociocultural dynamics and limit the formation of growth-fostering relationships (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). RCT posits that working towards building growth-fostering relationships will lead to a greater sense of personal wellbeing and self-agency (Jordan, 2006).
Statement of the Problem

African American and Latina adolescent girls who are growing up in urban communities are faced with unique difficulties and struggles that include community violence, peer group instability, family stressors, poverty and discrimination (Cohen, 2005) as well as interpersonal victimization, unrealistic media images of girls and women, oppression, devaluation, limited economic resources, role overload, and relationship disruptions ("Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Girls and Women," 2007). Further, the concerns, behaviors, values, attitudes, and feelings of girls also arise from the increasingly complex interactions and intersections among their multiple identities related to age, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, culture, immigration, geography, and other life experiences (Sparks & Park, 2000; Stewart & McDermott, 2004).

While programming has been developed to address urban girls’ experiences, a majority of programs have focused on deficits rather than strengths, further narrowing, ignoring and misrepresenting what it means to live in their worlds. Within this traditional framework, the girls’ capacity to make positive change in their lives are therefore misunderstood and undervalued in school-based programs. It is this gap between research on urban girls and the girls’ actual experiences and potential that this program, StrongLinks, aimed to expand and evaluate. As the true stakeholders of the program, the girls were asked to share their personal experiences, opinions and perspectives to contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of the program and inform the researchers of what was culturally relevant and effective in their learning and growth. Especially with funding for girls’ programs decreasing, it is critical that researchers continue to study girls and their development. These programs represent “homeplaces,” spaces for resistance (Pastor, et al., 2007) and “community living
rooms” (Lopez & Lechuga, 2007) for girls and facilitate the discussion, experience, connection and critical consciousness to learn how to view themselves, their life situation and their futures more positively. During adolescence, the crossroads of their development, girls’ programs are vital to building healthy psychological resistance and growth.

Purpose and Potential Benefits of the Research

“Girls want to tell us the story of their lives. So, taking the time to listen, ask questions and connect with them is the single most important thing we can do for girls” (Orenstein, 2000, p. xiii). Therefore, one of the main goals of StrongLinks was to provide a safe space for girls to use their voices and empower themselves to explore the unique meanings of their life experiences, identities and development; a space where the girls could meet and identify their own issues, and brainstorm and exchange ideas of how to problem-solve to address these issues. By providing a context where their relationships, capacities and resources could become the vehicle for their own empowerment, the girls could take action and make social change to affect their lives. A secondary aim was to evaluate the program’s impact and relevance to the girls’ relationships.

A mixed methodology approach was used in the program evaluation. Qualitative measures, such as interviews and focus groups, provided the researchers an opportunity to get to know each of the girls in the program and become intimately knowledgeable and connected to their lives. Quantitative measures, such as the Relational Health Indices (Liang, et al., 2002) and the Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992) were also incorporated to explore aspects of the girls’ relationships. Both qualitative and quantitative measures were administered at the beginning and end of the program to determine
whether participation had an impact on the girls’ relational health and understanding of their relationships.

The program’s participatory action research (PAR) methodology and evaluation involved establishing and maintaining relationships with the girls and involving them in all aspects of the research process; it is a type of research that is “inherently relational- the researchers are as much a part of the findings as the participants” (Way, 1995a, p. 3). That is, PAR allowed an egalitarian experience for both the girls and the researchers to gain new knowledge and uncover misunderstood knowledge. This framework challenges more traditional, hierarchical relationships between adults and adolescents, particularly in a school setting. In line with PAR’s focus on social responsibility, the process is an exchange, not an imposition. We believe that the girls want to express their opinions, values and needs and were empowered through having a voice in the changes that will affect them. Thus, their ideas and contributions about the program were a central aspect of the program evaluation. In this way, the girls could become agents of change and become the driving force in developing more salient and effective programming to benefit other girls their age.

Moreover, it was believed that by adopting a strength-based approach, the girls would feel empowered to build upon their existing strengths and resources to develop new competencies needed to support them in dealing with the adversities in their lives in a proactive manner. Studies have shown that, collectively, assets, resources, and protective factors may diminish or counteract the consequences of adverse life experiences (Scales, 1999; Shaffer, Coffino, Boelcke-Stennes, & Masten, 2007). Through PAR, the girls’ sense of personal power would enable them to initiate change because they would see the possibility of transformative actions (Rafael, 1998).
Through the involvement of community and family members and developing activities and discussions that consider the multiple contexts of the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic representations in the group, the researchers (including the girls) developed a program that reflected the girls’ diverse perspectives and needs. It would also provide a space that allowed participants to have a dialogue around recognizing “that there is much wrong with the world and that they cannot hide,” but rather, need to take action (Pastor, et al., 2007, p. 76). Therefore, recognition of the need for strategies in building healthy psychological resistance was a critical intervention as it helped girls to deconstruct, rather than internalize, stereotypes that perpetuate society’s view of them during this time of identity formation.

An additional component of the StrongLink’s curriculum was an emphasis on the girls’ relationships that could be used as a vehicle through which to address various issues in their lives. As previously mentioned, ongoing growth-fostering relationships can lead to increased zest, clarity, empowerment, self worth and desire for future connections (Miller, 1976) and help girls understand the contradictory needs and desires their families, culture, school environment and community place on them. In addition, these relationships can be enhanced by mutual interchanges (Genero, 1992) in ways that will increase their sense of connectedness to one another, allow them to feel more capable to take action, to acquire an increased knowledge of self and the other, to establish a greater sense of self-worth and validation, and to desire more connection with others beyond the immediate interaction (Miller, 1988). Building mutuality, respect and trust in the relationships within the group (with each other and with the researchers) was a critical component of the PAR process.

The multifaceted identities of the participating girls and their unique and shared developmental needs, strengths and assets were integral to the program’s design. The potential
benefits of the program-inspired dialogue and interaction were that the girls would feel supported in developing strategies of resistance (such as ways in which they challenge stereotypes), identify, understand and expand sources of relational support (mentorship and growth fostering relationships with peers, family and adults) and help build a responsive school-community that would help them better understand themselves and each other. By accomplishing these tasks, the project’s participants would contribute to the larger effort in better understanding and supporting urban adolescent girls. This centrality on activism within their school and community environments would provide the girls a framework to effect positive change in their own lives and the lives of other girls.

Major Research Questions

Qualitative research questions

1. What are the multiple ways a sample of urban adolescent girls speak about and understand themselves and their relationships within the contexts of their culture, family, peers and community?

2. How do the girls experience the program?

3. How do the girls describe processes of growth and change during the program, particularly around their relationships?

Quantitative research questions and hypotheses

4. Will girls’ levels of relational competencies be affected by the group experience?

   Hypothesis: It is speculated that the girls’ participation in the group will increase their awareness of experiences in relationships and will further enhance their process of meaningful connection in relationships and therefore, increase their levels of relational competence.

5. Will girls’ levels of perceived mutuality be affected by the group experience?
Hypothesis: It is speculated that the girls’ participation in the group will provide the girls an opportunity to discuss perceived mutuality in their relationships and lead to girls’ increased levels of mutuality and connectedness to a deeper, more authentic and safer relational context.

Definitions

Urban

The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban as all cities and incorporated places with populations of 2,500 or more (1995, www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urdef.txt). 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).

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 psychological outcome.

Relational health (competence)
Researchers at the Stone Center for Women at Wellesley College assert that growth fostering qualities of women’s relational skills empower individuals as well as their relationships by increasing a sense of worth, vitality and validation, knowledge of self and others and a desire for further connection (Jordan, 1997; Liang, et al., 2002). Relational health is a measure of mutual engagement, authenticity, empowerment/ zest and ability to deal with difference or conflict in peer, mentor and community relationships.

**Mutuality**

Mutuality in close relationships refers to the bidirectional movement of feelings, thoughts, and activity between individuals in relationships. It also involves a shared sense of relationship that transcends the immediate and reciprocal exchange of benefits (Genero, et al., 1992). Relational-cultural researchers view mutuality as incorporating diverse types of social interaction that facilitate participation in and growth through relationships.
CHAPTER II

This chapter provides a critical analysis of the literature. It begins with a strength-based approach to understanding urban girls within the context of positive youth development. A brief description of female adolescent and ethnic identity development is reviewed followed by an introduction to the feminist ecological and relational cultural models. Participatory action research and evaluation will then be detailed. The importance of resiliency and expressive therapies will also be addressed in the chapter; however, for a more in-depth review of these two topics consult the companion studies of Lindsay Amper and Amanda Allen. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a review of existing girls’ programming, including the proposed RALLY program, StrongLinks.

A Strength-Based Approach to Understanding Urban Girls’ Development

Urban girls constitute a strong, diverse, yet vulnerable group of girls living and growing up in marginalized environments that constantly challenge and threaten their potential for positive development. The realities of growing up in inner-city areas include violence through poverty, racism, single-parent families, drugs, peer group instability, and family stressors, among others (McIntyre, 2000). Urban adolescent girls may also experience a unique pattern of trauma exposure as a consequence of community violence. Horowitz and colleagues (2005) define compounded community trauma as multiple traumatic events both in the home and outside of the home (on the streets and at school) that occur throughout their development. These experiences, in turn, have been linked to potentially negative mental health outcomes on girls that may hinder their healthy development, such as post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse and behavior problems (Horowitz, et al., 2005; Ozer, 2005)
Clearly, previous research on urban girls has identified how they are often “shortchanged” through the multiple factors that inhibit their development; while this is important in understanding the adversities they face, the literature has largely neglected to include an analysis of how girls can resist and overcome these contextual and environmental influences. By doing this, the developmental focus has been consistently and narrowly on girls’ individual deficits and lack of coping. And while urban girls are at high risk for unwanted pregnancy, delinquency, problem behaviors, depression, school dropout, welfare and low-income jobs, these problems are not all pervasive, are not intrinsic to this population and should not be generalized to all urban girls (Leadbeater & Way, 2007; McIntyre, 2000).

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

Adolescence: A Crossroads in Girls’ Development

Adolescence is conceptualized as a crucible event- a crossroads in women’s lives- a meeting place between becoming a girl and a woman, an intersection between psychological health and cultural regeneration, a watershed in women’s psychology (Brown & Gilligan, 1992a;
Deak, 2002). It is also a time of heightened psychological risk for girls where loss of vitality, resilience, and sense of self are markers of this developmental period. As Mary Pipher (1994) described in her pivotal and revolutionary book, *Reviving Ophelia*, adolescence is a time of coming of age, when girls are navigating a more dangerous world, and yet, are less protected-a time when girls experience a “loss of self.” Statistics on girls’ emotional and physical well being paint a picture of enormous and alarming concern (Deak, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that adolescence is accompanied by an increase in problems such as depression, eating disorders, poor body image, suicidal thoughts and gestures, and a devastating decrease in self-esteem and worth (Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991).

Historically, adolescence has been defined by male-dominated theorists and has focused on separation and individuation as the primary goals (Erikson, 1968). When Carol Gilligan (1982) re-defined adolescence to include female-specific experiences in the developmental literature, a new and more authentic theory was born. It demanded a reframing of developmental norms previously based in the experiences of males and thereby worked to emancipate girls from such patriarchal developmental norms, values and standards.

Following Gilligan, other feminist researchers began describing girls’ development in a way that captured the centrality of relationships in girls’ and women’s lives. It emphasized how a girls’ growing sense of self is constructed and nurtured by her ability to form and maintain meaningful and close relationships. It is this inner sense and desire for connection with others and with one’s own feelings and knowledge that is the central organizing goal of girls’ development (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), not separation and individuation. And it is within and through these relationships that underlie women’s ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).
However, with the onset of adolescence comes the storm of contradictions and pressures associated with cultural conventions of femininity, voice and power (Taylor, et al., 1995) that cause girls’ voices to go underground, disappear and become dangerously silent in relationships. It signals a developmental and relational crisis as girls disconnect from their authentic selves and lose their voices in response to the too-often contradictory messages and expectations propagated by a patriarchal society. Thus, voice and silence become strategies in navigating the multiple and contradictory conventions girls learn at home and school (Taylor, et al., 1995). Moreover, it is also symbolic of girls’ psychological difficulty with “coming into relationship with this culture” (Bernardez, 1991).

Ethnic Identity Development

Clearly, there are a multitude of challenges that adolescents face. However, it is made increasingly more difficult and is further compounded by the complexity of minority, urban girls’ lives. This is reflected in the research on African-American and Latina girls’ development, which seeks to offer a more culturally specific and reflective framework that incorporates the influence of social class, ethnicity and racial identity theories with the gender-based theories described above. Pastor, McCormick, Fine, & Andolsen (1996) assert that urban girls, in searching for their identities during adolescence, are faced with racism, sexism, classism and cultural hegemony that challenge them to develop a critical consciousness. Moreover, the development of an ethnic or racial identity affects girls’ psychological development, academic achievement and ability to cope with discrimination and racism (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006; Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). This process requires individuals to integrate their race or ethnic-related experiences and for adolescent girls, this necessitates making connections between patterns of family socialization, beliefs, attitudes and values developed over time and
their subjective understanding of the role race or ethnicity plays in their lives (Bessette, 2003; Pahl & Way, 2006).

* African-American Girls

In the face of oppression and discrimination, traditions of resistance have been born of the African-American community (Pahl & Way, 2006). By countering negative stereotypes and developing more positive images of themselves, African-American girls may experience increased sense of affirmation and belonging during adolescence (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Many African-American youth’s socialization include traditions that emphasize pride on one’s heritage and an awareness of coping strategies for dealing with racial prejudices (Hughes, 2003; Phinney & Chavira, 1995)

The research of Robinson and Ward (1991) emphasizes and holds central the development of resistance as a way for African-America girls to think critically about themselves, the world and their place in it. It is one way to deconstruct the complexity of urban girls’ worlds and situations. This notion of resistance is a health-sustaining process, a political strategy, and ultimately, a process that helps unmask each girl’s individual history of resistance. This framework also provides the opportunity for the development of a healthy critical perspective towards expectations and stereotypes that they face. Feminist researchers have further defined and elaborated on this notion of resistance as not always being a strategy of psychological strength, but sometimes becoming a source of unhealthy expression. Robinson and Ward (1991) posit that there is an integral and defining difference between resistance for survival and resistance for liberation.

Resistance for survival encompasses short-term, quick-fix reactions to hostile and oppressive environments, such as substance abuse, academic failure and school drop-out and
disordered eating. Moreover, girls’ internalization of the negative images and stereotypes put forth by the media (and other sources of discrimination) of what it means to be a black girl may result in their eventual self-denigration. These quick fix behaviors are deeply rooted to the African worldview of connectedness and collective responsibility, whereupon the traditional theory of adolescent development stressing autonomy and individuation is contrary to their cultural values. The result of minimizing and denying their cultural connections may lead girls to excessive autonomy and individualism at the expense of connectedness. Together, these represent factors that lead girls to decreased self-esteem and impede their positive identity development.

However, resistance for liberation is a path where African-American girls chose to acknowledge the problems of oppressive forces in their lives by resisting through their struggles for self-definition and self-determination. Instead of engaging in quick fixes, they embark on more transformative actions. Robinson and Ward (1991) assert that,

“efforts to promote the liberation of one’s self and one’s community require and sustain a self-conscious process of seeking to identify and transcend imposed systematic barriers by drawing upon the strengths of one’s history and cultural conventions” (p. 90).

**Latina Girls**

Likewise, girls of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent also resist the negative images portrayed of them through ethnic affirmation and belonging (Pahl & Way, 2006). The celebration of national holidays, displaying symbols of national pride, close ties to home country, and the use of Spanish language all contribute and represent protective factors in Latina girls’ identity development.

The resistance of Latina and Dominican adolescent girls was explored in a pilot study (Rivera, 1999) and revealed that perhaps girls did not experience the resistance for survival and
liberation as separate processes as Ward and Robinson suggest (1991), but rather, as converging and overlapping processes through their beliefs, actions and realities. Rivera (1999) therefore proposed the concept of dialectical resistance. This view was developed with Rogers’ (1995/6) concept of “double subjectivity” at its core, as a way of explaining girls’ capacity and struggle to grasp two contradictory voices or perspectives, along with their own experiences. This concept also takes into account the social lens through which young girls perceive themselves and moderate their feelings and thoughts (Rivera, 1999). In this way, dialectical resistance captures girls’ struggle with the multiplicity of ways of knowing, understanding and resisting across the different contexts in their lives that may be simultaneously liberating and oppressive.

For some immigrant Latina girls, adopting a bicultural identity may function as a way for them to compromise the demands and norms of both their native (family’s) culture and that of living in the mainstream, American society. In the Latino culture, it is also important to loyally maintain family values, yet this can become a confusing and complex task with all the messages a Latina girl may be getting about what it means to be both a Latina and an American girl. For example, traditional Latina gender roles and expectations within a family may be at direct odds with a more modern, American view of women. Further, Latina mothers may socialize their daughters to adhere to more traditional conventions of femininity and pass down a more dependent, passive and obedient vision of womanhood (Taylor, 1996).

Other research has suggested that Latina girls struggle with the competing and contradictory demands and expectations of their home and school life that can be compounded by language barriers. At home, they are expected to be cooperative and compliant; in school, these attitudes may cause girls to be ill-equipped to compete successfully (Sullivan, 1997). Further, for immigrant girls, the process of acculturation necessitates constant negotiation
between the cultures of their school, society and family. Further complicating this process, are the multiple values attached to being a young Latina female which may not translate from one culture to another (Ekrut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996) including conflicting messages about standards for beauty and sexuality (Bessette, 2003). It is this dichotomy of their biculturalism and potential for acculturative stress as she “fumbles with double consciousness, double vision, and double voice within her being” (Bessette, 2003) that place Latina girls at heightened risk during adolescence.

Reframing from a Feminist Perspective

Feminist therapy is rooted in the awareness that historically mainstream psychological theories and practices have overlooked and further marginalized the experiences and voices of non-dominant and disempowered groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (Ballou & West, 2000). This study is deeply committed to feminist therapy’s principles of valuing all experience and individual differences, redressing power differentials, contextualizing the causes of emotional distress, questioning the norms and standards of traditional mental health practice and theory, and recognizing the imperative for social change (Ballou & West, 2008). By committing to these principles, one is able to maintain awareness of the multiplicity of people’s experiences as well as facilitate this awareness in others (Barrett, 2008).

Feminist Ecological Model

This appreciation for a multidimensional worldview where multiplicity, intersectionality and power are recognized is embedded in the feminist ecological model—an expansion on Brofenbrenner’s ecological theory (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002b). This model draws from aspects of contextual, feminist and multicultural psychology to bring out the complex systems that may surround the individual. It represents “multiple dimensions of human
existence, of real-world complexity, of multiple models of living and ways of knowing, of multidirectional interactions between the person and his/her contexts, and of direct, contiguous, and distal influences” (Ballou, Matsumoto, Wagner, & Brown, 2002, p. 118).

The model contains several levels (individual, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem). The individual level includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual dimensions of the person. The microsystem includes familial, spiritual, educational, and other support systems and institutions with which the individual routinely interacts; the exosystem includes social, governmental, legal, and political policies and institutions with which a person may or may not have direct contact but that impact on a person’s privileges, opportunities, oppressions, and general flexibility of movement; and the macrosystem reflects factors such as cultural values, global influences, worldviews, and ideologies. Intersecting with all of these systems are the statuses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, historical time period, and other influences that are relevant to ecological systems (Hill & Ballou, 1998).

As Barrett (2008) describes, the strength of the feminist ecological approach is that it implores us to continually locate all of these intersecting contexts and networks of realities within the experience of the individual and then focus on a process of awareness and change that grows out of and then beyond that individual experience. As a result, it helps one take into account empowerment perspectives at both individual and social change levels. For urban girls, this means incorporating their multiple perspectives and acknowledging how girls’ environments, relationships, family, and culture simultaneously shape their worlds and experiences. It is akin to looking at girls through the lens of a “kaleidoscope” of identities.
(McIntyre, 2000). It is why girls’ stories cannot be separated from the cultural and societal context from which they are spoken (Way, 1995a).

Relational Psychology

Among the dominant theories of human development during the 1970’s emerged a perspective that allowed the authentic, lived experience of women to break into psychological theory. Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller and Judith Lewis Herman were among the pioneering women who confronted the existing theories to re-shape the conceptions and understandings of women and by doing so, begin the relational revolution. These women were central in building the foundations of relational psychology, as they investigated the motives, moral judgments, psychological growth and views of what is important to women (Robb, 2006). They joined together to move the present psychology from a previously misconstrued conceptual framework of women to one born of real, lived experience and one that placed the relationship and a mutual sense of connection as central to human growth. They proposed a psychology of connection, relationship and democracy; a psychology that places women and children as important subjects to study and understand; a psychology that acknowledges power imbalances and treats them as political rather than as natural and works through the relational aspects of community, connection and authenticity.

Relational-Cultural Model

Of particular importance was the groundbreaking work of Miller in “Toward a New Psychology of Women” (1976) which signified the foundation of the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). Together, her efforts in collaboration with Judith Jordan, Alexandra Kaplan, Irene Stiver, and Jannet Surrey aimed to reframe and bring forth the relational aspects of girls’ and women’s development. These women investigated the mainstream and dominant idea that
healthy people outgrew relationships to become separate individuals. It led them to recognize
that this was in stark contrast to the pull toward connection they felt in their own lives. Each
began to advocate that this intrinsic drive that women felt was not wrong or maladaptive, but
rather, that human psychological growth could be viewed as a process of differentiation and
elaboration in relationships rather than disengagement and separation (Surrey, 1985). Their
collaboration worked to shift the psychodynamic focus on the independent ‘self’ to one that had
the capacity to de-center and place authenticity as central to development to relational growth.

Criticisms of RCT

Among the feminist theorists, RCT signified a point of philosophical conflict that divides
two factions of feminist thought; cultural and social (Sillitti, 2005). The cultural feminist sector
focuses on the behavioral and emotional differences between genders and places emphasis on the
conventionally valued feminine qualities of relatedness and intimacy; thus the roots of RCT.
This perspective facilitates active resistance against patriarchal views that devalue relatedness as
a weakness and instead promote autonomy. The social feminist sector, however, warns against
associating relatedness with femininity as it may serve to perpetuate, rather than diminish the
gender divide and hierarchy originally limiting women’s roles to the home and family
(Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978). Further, social feminists caution against placing women
into broad, universal categories and instead, encourage genderless humanity with an integration
of feminine and masculine qualities.

Another of the main criticisms of relational psychology is its initial focus on white,
middle-class women and lack of representative research on other ethnic groups. However, over
the past several years, RCT researchers have worked to broaden this theory to incorporates boys,
men, varying sexual orientations, ethnicities, races and social classes (Spencer, 2000), and

This critical shift is captured by Walker’s (2003) statement about the evolution of RCT from self-in-relational theory to relational-cultural theory (Bell, 2008). This “reflects an elaborated understanding of connection from a primarily interpersonal encounter to a complex, pluralistic process.” Yet, there is still much work to do to incorporate relational psychology into women’s development for all women, across all cultures, socioeconomic classes and ethnicities. This program was conceptualized on RCT with the aim to expand the theory’s applicability to a population of urban adolescent girls and contribute to the growing literature on RCT in diverse groups.

The Issue of Voice/Urban Girls’ Resistance

Threaded through RCT is the concept of voice whereupon experience and relationship can both be heard and silenced. Many Caucasian, middle-class American girls seemed to become silenced by societal messages to avoid conflict and difference and suppress their intrinsic feelings of anger and hurt during adolescence, because speaking honestly might endanger the relationship. Conversely, researchers found that girls of color and low-income backgrounds did not mirror this same behavior. Rather, they tended to speak their minds, express opinions, dare to disagree and speak the truth in their relationships. Their voices spoke out about anger, pain, disloyalty, frustration as well as love and loyalty (Way, 1995a). Similarly, Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) found:
“Girls whose voices are socially marginalized because of their class, race, ethnic background, or sexual orientation may also be more difficult to listen to than other girls because they are often more willing and able to speak painful or difficult truths…many of the at-risk low income girls in the Understanding Adolescence Study evidence little hesitation in acknowledging the presence, in these areas of their lives, of anger, betrayal, sexual desire, unfairness, wanting power- all the thoughts, feelings and experiences girls are expected to cover over or deny.”

It is this connection to holding on to their voices, their realities and their truths that may represent a key protective factor and strength of urban girls. Way (1995) explored the roots of why there exists this discrepancy in voice among girls and found that the socialization practices of girls of color contribute to their resilience. That is, African American and Latina girls’ mothers teach them to be independent, confident women who are not passive, but who have to be stronger to thrive because of the circumstances such as poverty and racism that they face. Gloria Wade Gayles (1984) described speaking out as a survival strategy as “black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues black women” (p12). The research of Pastor, McCormick and Fine (1996) on urban girls similarly shows that girls learn to assert themselves in environments where they are the minority.

By staying connected and attuned to their voices and authentic feelings, urban girls are able to solidify their own sense of value, power, and capacity to face the challenges and realities in their lives. When we are able to really listen to the girls’ voices, rich with their life experiences, we can begin to see their world and inner life through their stories. In this way, we can align with girls’ growing strengths in exploring their relationships, coping and building of resistance strategies. Our work with the girls in the StrongLinks program can help them make choices about the things they are willing to “swim upstream to get” and thus, help them become agents of positive change in their lives (Deak, 2002, p. 121).
Growth-fostering Relationships and the Five Good Things

RCT posits that all growth occurs in connection, that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Miller (1986) described five “good things” that characterize the outcomes of a growth-fostering relationship: 1) increased zest and vitality, 2) increased ability to take action (empowerment), 3) increased clarity, i.e., a clearer picture of one’s self, the other, and the relationship, 4) increased sense of worth, and 5) a desire for relationships beyond that particular relationship.

RCT suggests that there are several key components leading to such relationships. These include mutual engagement, defined as perceived mutual involvement, commitment, and attunement to the relationship. Authenticity which is the process of acquiring knowledge of self and the other and feeling free to be genuine in the context of the relationship. Mutual empowerment, the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged, and inspired to take action. And the ability to deal with difference or conflict which is the process of expressing, working through, and accepting differences in background, perspective, and feeling (Jordan & Hartling, 2002; Jordan, et al., 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). By exploring girls’ relationships in terms of these relational components, they can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and ebb and flow of their multi-faceted relationships with themselves, their peers, family and community.

Mutuality. Mutuality is a central construct of RCT, defined as the bidirectional movement of feelings, thoughts, and activity between persons in relationships (Genero, et al., 1992). According to Jordan (1999), it is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other person’s state. Mutual interchanges can
facilitate intimacy, self-disclosure, emotional resiliency, coping strategies and social support. As asserted by Miller and Stiver (1997), mutuality is not a concept that is synonymous with equality. Rather, it is a means of relating in which those involved engage in the cyclical process of a relationship (Cannon, 2008).

Mutual relationships also underscore how power can become a force, a problem and a political strategy—all acting within the realm of relationships. Sprague and Hayes (2000) explore self-determination and empowerment and conceptualize power in three ways: (1) power as a commodity or individual attribute; (2) power as a relationship of domination (i.e., power over); and (3) power as a capacity and capability (i.e., power to), specifically the power to challenge disabling, discriminatory social conditions. Janet Surrey studied this power within relationships and came to know a mutual power could exist as power with others, power in connection or relational power, rather than power over others. It is not personal power, but is power created by the movement of relationship, power that belongs to everyone in the relationship. That is, “neither person is in control; instead each is enlarged and feels empowered, energized and more real,” Surrey in (Robb, 2006). Being empathetic in a caring relationship is indeed a powerful process, but it is not about dominance; that is, a mutual relationship is a “relationship where neither person is at the center” (Robb, 2006). One of the aims StrongLinks hopes to accomplish is in helping the girls recognize how relationships that are non-mutual (and possess power-over) can lead to a sense of disconnection; whereas, relationships that are characterized by mutuality (power with), such as mentoring relationships, can lead to sense of connectedness and healing in their relationships.

*Breaking Cycles of Disconnection*
Relational paradox. Another component of RCT is the recognition that disconnection is an inevitable part of being in relationships and may result in a positive or negative outcome (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Of importance, RCT’s central relational paradox often serves as a strategy for disconnection in adolescent girls (Miller & Stiver, 1997) and signifies a major road block to relational authenticity and therefore, relational health (Brown & Gilligan, 1992a). This occurs in situations where the less powerful or injured person in the relationship is unable to communicate her feelings or is responded to with indifference, injury, or denial of her experience. She will begin to keep aspects of herself out of the relationship for the protection of the relationship and this leads to a loss of authenticity and mutuality and a failure of growth fostering relationships. It happens when girls and women mold themselves to fit a relationship and along the way, lose more and more of their authentic selves. Conversely, relational competence is achieved when the injured or less powerful person in the relationship is able to express her feelings and is met with an empathic response. In this way, experiences of disconnection can lead to a strengthened relationship whereupon concerns are voiced openly, disconnections are addressed and feedback is received (Jordan, 2004).

Sociocultural disconnection. Disconnections also happen on the sociocultural and political level and are fueled by discriminatory practices and distortions of the dominant culture (Walker & Rosen, 2004). Although racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism all obstruct one’s ability to engage and participate in growth-fostering relationships, these cultural factors are often invisible. This is compounded by dominant groups using shame to keep subordinate groups in a state of oppression (Jordan, 2000). Further, this exercise of dominance and privilege destroys the potential for authenticity and mutuality in relationships. Thus, these sociocultural dynamics inflict disconnection, silence, shame, and isolation on marginalized groups (Jordan &
In response, Miller (1987) urges girls and women to “wage good conflict” by naming the impact of culture on their development and self-esteem. For marginalized girls growing up in violence and poverty, validating and de-pathologizing their experiences can lead to an appreciation of the real strengths they have developed at the margin (Jordan & Dooley, 2001) and foster connection and empowerment rather than isolation and shame.

Critical feminist consciousness. Critical feminist consciousness is a way of knowing that is aware and reflective. Through this perspective, the possibility for constructing a different way of being in the world with others is elucidated and made possible (Gilligan, et al., 1991). Likewise, consciousness raising is defined as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 19). By exposing girls to these processes of critical thinking, they are able to deconstruct the oppressive and hierarchical systems in their lives, and develop strategies to act on and change their present situation (Pearrow & Pollack, 2009).

However, as Pastor and colleagues (2007) point out, urban girls often do not seek each other out for collective action and address the inequities in their lives and communities. So, simply learning about social oppression and not doing anything about it is not enough. Instead, transformation and activism needs to be learned. Social individuality is making sense of social injustice and oppression and can arise from an awareness of racism (Lykes, 1985). It also protects cultural connectedness. Through the development of StrongLinks, the girls could become agents of change to build their own “homeplaces.” Girls are hungry for an “us” through feminist spaces such that bell hooks describes where girls share secrets, connected stories, make political sense out of personal misery and organize in resistance (Pastor, et al., 2007).
A poignant example of one such “homeplace” of critical consciousness is Alice McIntyre’s participatory action research with urban youth about constructing meaning about violence (2000). She committed to listening to young people’s stories, giving them the opportunity to speak about their lives, and collaborating with them in designing plans of action to address their concerns. In doing so, the participants’ dialogue on violence deconstructs the belief that the violence in urban communities “can be eliminated by focusing solely on the victims and/or perpetrators of violence” (p.3). Further, the program allowed the participants’ stories to challenge researchers to redefine the parameters of how to think about and make meaning of violence. Here, McIntyre opened the door to more effectively frame research questions and teaching pedagogies around urban youth’s understandings of violence and urban life while empowering urban youth to become their own experts about their daily lives and develop realistic solutions for dealing with the problems that they believe need to be addressed.

Differences. Although growth-fostering connections seek to address the contradictions of living in a patriarchal power structure, often racial differences among girls and women pose a dynamic of exclusion, marginality, and oppression (Walker, Jordan, & Hartling, 2004). An awareness of the different forms of unearned advantage and power is an essential part of connection. This is particularly significant within the development and implementation of this program since all three researchers are Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class, highly educated women who, because of these identities, carry privilege, advantage and power. It was hoped that by acknowledging, attending to and encouraging dialogue around these differences, a path towards understanding one another and the existing racial barriers can be tread and by doing so, moments of connection and disconnection could be experienced. Ultimately, we all recognize that “being oneself is a political, relational act” (Robb, 2006, p. 182).
Trauma. Moreover, girls living in urban areas often witness and experience trauma which can also be viewed as a source of relational disconnection. Amy Banks (2006) stated that the relational impact of “every human interaction during an individual’s life, whether healthy, abusive or somewhere in between, will make a mark on the future relational capacity of the individual” (p.185). One’s capacity to form and sustain meaningful relationships is rooted in one’s relational images, which serve to organize one’s experience and are derived from past relational experiences (Miller & Stiver, 1995). These images contribute to one’s fundamental understanding of relationships—how they are made, sustained, and nurtured. Therefore, a young girl who has experienced trauma may form negative relational images about her world; this may then perpetuate a negative sense of self and relationships.

Resilience from a relational perspective. Resilience refers to a process of doing well and 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). Therefore it is necessary to both identify the threats to development and a judgment about adaptational success (Shaffer, 2007). Further, 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). In this way, the concept of resilience is not static, but intrinsically dynamic. And as Joann Deak (2002) described, resiliency in girls is “finding a way to survive and keep going, regardless of what obstacles are put in the road.” (p.114). Future directions for research on when resilience emerges and whether it endures through time and transitions is a significant area of research to apply to urban girls in order to further our understanding of their struggles and strengths (Shaffer, 2007).
According to RCT, resiliency is deeply connected to growth-fostering relationships and is defined as the movement towards these mutually empowering relationships in the face of adversities, trauma and sociocultural stereotypes and pressures (Jordan, 2004). Relational resiliency “is the ability to connect, reconnect and/or resist disconnection” (p. 83). Within Jordan’s alternative model of resiliency are the following propositions (Kappus, 2008):

1. From individual “control over” dynamics to a model of supported vulnerability
2. From a one-directional need for support from other to mutually empathic involvement in the well-being of each person and of the relationship itself
3. From separate self-esteem to relational confidence
4. From the exercise of “power over” dynamics to empowerment, by encouraging mutual growth and constructive conflict
5. From finding meaning in self-centered self-consciousness to creating meaning in a more expansive relational awareness

Program Development & Evaluation

*Participatory action research (PAR)*

Although school is among the most pervasive institutions in the lives of young people in the United States and can become a platform for critical thinking, problem solving and taking action to improve community (Pearrow and Pollack, 2009), schools can also become sources of disconnection. Rather than serving as a path for opportunity and social mobility, schools can perpetuate and legitimize inequalities of race, class and gender (Weis & Fine, 2001). Further, by separating girls’ personal and political worlds, school can become a contradictory and constricting place of learning (Pastor, et al., 2007).
Friere’s (1970) “banking” concept of education, where the teacher assumes a paternalistic role and deposits information to students who assume a passive role, is one mode of disconnection and oppression. A poignant example of this is the statement of a thirteen-year-old girl named Rachel from Lyn Mikel Brown’s study in Maine (1998). She stated, “You want to know something that makes me mad? When teachers think that they can do and say anything they want to us and they don’t care how it makes us feel, but we have to be so careful what we say to them. It’s really stupid.” This type of hierarchical structure and exchange not only limits critical dialogue, but also ensues a cycle of oppression (Parrow and Pollack, 2009).

However, there is also a potential for urban schools to become change agents through activist research, built from the foundation of Friere’s (1970) ideas of liberatory education. While activist research values pathways to understanding the multiple stakeholders, it takes the research trajectory one step further to a goal of social action. It implores researchers to contextualize and politicize their studies of urban schooling and programming while reframing the researcher/subject roles to co-researchers and co-participants (Nygreen, 2006). Thus, the model of participatory action research (PAR).

PAR is deeply rooted in Friere’s educational philosophy and aims to work towards creating alternate learning opportunities of critical thinking, empowerment and social action to resist and reframe these inequities. Thus, PAR is an attempt to incorporate Friere’s ideas into a research methodology. In this way, PAR can transform learning communities and become spaces of “reeducation” (Weis & Fine, 2001). The current program, StrongLinks, embraced PAR as a way for the girls and researchers to cooperate in all aspects of the development of the program in a joint, co-learning process. The program focused on the meaning of their involvement as co-researchers, as the girls engage in critical dialogue about their lives, issues
and values. It was motivated and made hopeful by this challenge and possibility of giving the girls a space “to sculpt real and imaginary corners for peace, solace, communion, social critique, personal and collective work” (Weis & Fine, 2001).

Participatory Program Evaluation

Participatory program evaluation is applied social research that incorporates aspects of PAR into research and practice and holds central the concern for the needs of stakeholders and those directly participating in the research process (Cohen, 2005). Several foundational contributors (Guba, 1975; Stake, 1968) helped to shape the field of participatory evaluation by offering alternative methods to evaluation; ones that moved away from objectivist and mechanistic methods to linking results with a stakeholder perspective. Thus, one of the aims of this work was improved communication and partnership between stakeholders and researchers to facilitate evaluations that would be intimately tied to the stakeholders (Cohen, 2005). By fostering a reciprocal relationship between stakeholders and researchers, control of the evaluation’s content and process is shared (Sharma, Suarez-Balcazar & Baetke, 2003). Another aim is to support and empower individuals from distressed or oppressed communities as partners in the research process (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005).

Among the participatory evaluations is a type of evaluation that values and involves youth as the stakeholders (Hart & Rajbhandary, 2003); thus youth participatory evaluation (YPE). This type of evaluation seeks to empower youth by providing them with “the tools to develop and validate knowledge and to direct the development of the programs and policies designed to serve their needs” (London, Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003, p. 10). This study chose to utilize YPE because it offered the girls of StrongLinks meaningful opportunities for leadership and dialogue while addressing critical issues of power (London & Zimmerman, 2003). The hope
was that by involving the girls through YPE, the evaluation outcome would closely mirror their needs and voices and further drive the StrongLinks program development and implementation.

**Using Arts as a Mode of Connection**

The development of the proposed program’s curriculum, StrongLinks, was centered on using the arts. By using such expressive techniques as psychodrama, writing, poetry, visual arts and music, the girls would be provided a creative and powerful way to explore their relationships, coping and sense of self. Ultimately, these methods would serve as an alternative, non-verbal way of expressing difficult life experiences and stories of disconnection that the girls may otherwise have trouble expressing with words (e.g., experiences of trauma, loss, and other painful memories) as well as provide them with a safer, less threatening way of connecting. For example, journal writing was an integral part of the program and served as a thought-provoking, nonjudgmental and liberating opportunity for the girls to express, develop, listen and reflect on their own authentic voices, thoughts and feelings. StrongLinks sought to explore the girls’ life stories and meaning making through their artistic expressions; the hope was that the girls would benefit and grow from such activities of self-reflection and creativity. In this way, participating in the process of creating artworks could become both a healing and transformative experience for the girls (Malchiodi, 1998; Malchiodi, 2005a, 2005b)

**Review of Girls’ Programming**

**One Size Does Not Fit All**

The Girls’ Coalition of Greater Boston (Wheeler, et al., 2005) outlines several positions on the state of youth programming for girls in Greater Boston. The authors’ first position speaks to the importance of single-sex girls’ programming as they cite the benefits gleaned from Molly Mead and the Young Sisters for Justice (2000). These benefits include:
1. Programs are designed with girls’ experiences and strengths in mind.
2. Programs are facilitated by women who can provide girls with inspiration and role models.
3. Programs help girls recognize the inequities they face in the world and help develop strategies to overcome those inequities.
4. Girls learn to respect themselves and one another.
5. Girls learn the importance of connecting with other girls and focusing on issues of joint concern.
6. Girls learn to develop positive relationships with their female relatives and with other adult women.
7. Girls learn about the different roles women play in their families, in communities, and in the workplace.
8. In terms of girls’ development, these programs take on a role that other institutions (i.e., schools, communities, and families) do not.

In contrast, Mead and colleagues (2000) noted that research on coeducational programming revealed fewer girls participating in the programs, a generally lower retention rate of girls and that the programs are often poorly designed to develop girls’ capacities. This further emphasizes the need for the development and research on single-sex programming for girls and several key elements have been identified to do this (Wheeler, et al., 2005). They include a needs assessment, family and community involvement, cultural appreciation and critique, collaboration with other gender-sensitive programs, diversity training and adequate funding. When these components are integrated, girls’ programming can serve as an influential and protective environment for their positive development and resiliency.

Responsive Advocacy for Life and Learning (RALLY)

The StrongLinks program has been conceptualized and developed through the framework of the RALLY program, developed by developmental psychologist, Gil Noam (http://www.pearweb.org/rally/). RALLY is part of Harvard University’s Program in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency (PEAR). It is also one component of the Curley-RALLY Consortium, a school-community collaborative comprised of school leadership, community
agencies/ organizations, and families that work together to help youth achieve academic and social success. Through theory, practice, and research, RALLY aims to provide an integrated model of mental health services and educational support to students in school and afterschool settings. It is an inclusive, strength-based model of intervention that helps build students' competence and resilience through relationships with positive adult figures and works in collaboration with families, teachers, school administrators, community programs, mental health professionals, and others to support students' success. RALLY’s guiding principles aim to “bridge” the many worlds (school, after-school, family, and community) of youth. Together, these principles have guided the researchers to develop a program that reflected these core values and vision for youth.

Existing Programs for Girls

A comprehensive review of girls’ programming reveals various methodologies, foci and organizations providing opportunities to girls of varying demographics and needs (refer to Table 1 in Appendix A). These programs are born from the work of foundations, non-profit organizations and academic institutions such as the Women’s Sports Foundation, Urban Girls Scouts of American, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The type of programs range from preventative, educational, and experiential in nature to those focused on issues of social and economic activism/ change, media literacy and physical well-being (i.e., body image, athletic participation and HIV prevention). Additional programs seek to promote leadership skills and mentorship relationships with peers and communities. There also exist a handful of programs designed for girls of specific ethnic groups, such as African-American and Latina, whereupon knowledge of cultural roots, racial identity and development are the foci. Further, there are several programs aimed at serving girls growing up in urban environments and address
contextually relevant issues such as youth and community violence, urban ecology, reducing risk behaviors and increasing protective factors. Other programs utilize relational capacities and strategies to increase relational effectiveness and connection. Ultimately, these programs are all working through their unique methodologies, resources and needs assessments to promote positive development in girls.

The StrongLink’s program, in particular, aimed to identify, actualize and use girls’ voices and experiences to build their competence, confidence and connectedness through “acts of doing” (Deak, 2002, p. 267). Through this process of using girls’ voices to become and do (i.e., athletic doing, creative doing, connected doing, and other-than-self experiences), girls would have the opportunity of self-discovery and critical awareness. Although the StrongLink’s program was informed by the theories detailed in this chapter, it was created to mirror girls’ feedback, discussion and expressed needs from a focus group. It was within the relational context of the program that we hoped to create an alternative school environment to empower girls to use their strengths and resources within them and through their communities, cultures and families to actively engage in “doing.” And by taking this action to understand themselves, their stories and their visions more positively, girls could begin to re-define and resist the stereotypes placed on them thereby transforming themselves, paving their journeys of positive development and connection, and becoming contributing, leading members of society.
CHAPTER III

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

Co-Researcher Perspective

The formulation of this dissertation parallels my own growth as a feminist; as a graduate student; as an Italian and Greek- American young woman; as a sister, friend and partner; as a clinician and researcher. All of these aspects of me are threaded into this project; in this way, my personal history grounds this research as much as I hope the girls’ involved in the study will. I come into this project with my own assumptions and beliefs that impact my ideas and perspective. Similarly, each of the girls will come to the program with their perspectives and experiences guiding them. Through my mentors, I am pushed into awareness and acceptance of how my cultural self will impact this work and to recognize the realities of the cultural gaps between the girls and myself. I hope to balance this with finding the connections among us and to explore how the shared space of StrongLinks can be transformative. Ultimately, it is my belief in the power of healing relationships that has become the central motivating force behind this work.

As I reflect on my own journey and how it led me here, I think of my work with the VALOR project (Voices of Adolescent Latinas on Acculturation and Resilience) at Wellesley College. This has and continues to be one of the more powerful and culminating experiences that has helped guide me to this dissertation work. Through my initial role as interviewer, I met, listened to and heard the stories of many middle- school immigrant Latina girls as they became
acculturated into American society. I remember Nancy Genero, one of the co-investigators, explaining to me that the goal was to keep central each girl’s lived experience. She suggested I start each interview by saying, “You are your own expert on your life.” And by doing this, each of those girls showed me the powerful exchange that can happen when we truly listen. This experience introduced me to the practice of relational, feminist psychology and helped shape much of who I am as a clinician and researcher today.

The conception of StrongLinks came about as a conversation of three graduate students in the first year of their Ph.D. program. Together, Lindsay, Amanda and I shared our stories, struggles and hopes for ourselves and came to realize that we all converged around our desire for a dissertation that would provide us meaning. In a sense, our relationship with each other and shared interests were the driving vehicles for this project. Amanda’s interest in coping and resiliency in adolescent girls, Lindsay’s focus on expressive techniques and my belief and curiosity in the power of relationships provided a foundation for StrongLinks.

By deciding to do a collaborative project for our dissertation, we headed into uncharted waters within our Ph.D. program. We have encountered support and encouragement as well as resistance and challenge. But we are steadfast in our commitment to the girls and to engaging with them in a way that moves beyond researcher and subject- where we are all stakeholders and creating meaning and change together.

Research Design: Participatory Action Research (PAR)

The StrongLinks research project incorporated several foundational ideas: 1) to focus on the living experiences of the girls, 2) to take an inter-subjective and activist stance, and 3) to place an emphasis on social change. Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach that is
compatible with giving marginalized individuals a voice and empowering them to be the experts on their own lives (Smits, 1997). Hall (1992) describes PAR as,

> “a social action process that is biased in favor of dominated, exploited, poor, or otherwise ignored women and men and groups. It sees no contradiction between goals of collective empowerment and the deepening of social knowledge. The concern with power and democracy and their interactions are central to participatory research. It is a process that supports the voices from the margins in speaking, analyzing, building alliances and taking action…and argues for the articulation of points of view by the dominated or subordinated, whether from gender, race, ethnicity, or other structures of subordination” (p. 16, 22-23).

In this way, PAR addresses oppressive forces and strategies of resistance (Rivera, 1999). PAR also departs from more traditional, investigator-directed research in several fundamental ways, including its goals, assumptions, methods, benefits and limitations. These differences are summarized in Table 2 in Appendix B. (Hughes, 2003). Therefore, a PAR methodology was chosen to give voice to the Strong Link girls and make possible a deeper understanding of their life stories while also empowering them to make changes and to take action. Within the context of the PAR framework, engagement, mutual connection and centrality on the girls’ voices would become the vehicles for critically thinking about their relationships, coping and life experiences.

Providing a space for girls to feel safe and capable in sharing their stories through relational engagement and empathic listening was integral because if the girls could feel capable of speaking, they would be more likely to have a voice (Lind, 2005). And through their voices, the girls could provide the researchers with insights and understanding and therefore contribute to the change they desire and need for themselves and their communities. Thus, as PAR researchers, our focus was not on approaching the girls as subjects to be studied, but instead, on the connections and understandings made through relationship (Brown & Gilligan, 1992b; Fine, 1998; Fine, et al., 2003; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Mckelvey, 2003; Way, 1995b).
In line with PAR, the three researchers in this project also served as the program coordinators. They facilitated the groups each week and were responsible for collecting data. Because the researchers were a consistent part of the group members’ lives, the hope was that they would be more willing to share their experiences with people who they have come to know and trust. An integral component of PAR was each researcher’s awareness of her own perspective, life experiences and background (including cultural, racial, ethnic and power differentials) to attempt to provide a meeting place where there existed no insiders or outsiders, where power structures and hierarchies were addressed and replaced with egalitarian dialogue.

This awareness was necessary for creating a context in which critical dialogue could be exchanged and valued; where empowering strategies and ideas could occur. In this space, the co-researchers could together undertake a change process and critical consciousness in which the girls understood that they were capable of their own powerful actions (Lind, 2005). By engaging in such empowerment, the girls were exerting control over their own lives, gaining coping skills and confidence.

Methodology and Measures

The current study was a mixed-methods approach that utilized both qualitative and quantitative measures. It was chosen since the integration of these methods aims to balance the strengths and weaknesses of each methodology. Such an approach includes the critical elements of both process and outcome, where the researcher can explore and explain, leading to a more comprehensive and full understanding of the research (Creswell, 2005). The researcher chose this approach in order to capture the girls’ individual and collective experiences of being in the StrongLinks program. Specifically, these methods assessed the girls’ relational competencies
and mutuality within their relationships before and after participating in the program. A second and final aim was to measure how the girls’ experienced a strength-based school program.

**Qualitative Data**

Use of developmental assets framework for developing questions before, during and after the group were used to help, among other things, to determine the participants’ perceptions of their strengths and areas of difficulty (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were used because the researcher wanted to allow the girls the opportunity to freely talk about what they had on their minds. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to simultaneously gather critical information that was necessary to understand the girls, while still allowing for a more relational interchange between the researcher and participants.

Pre-group interviews were utilized at the onset of the study to help understand before long-term participation in StrongLinks, how the girls perceived relationships in their lives, how they coped with perceived life problems, what their interests were, who their support systems included, and how they identified the struggles/concerns they had. It was also important to understand if they were comfortable or familiar with arts of any kind. Some young women may have preferred music to visual arts, and knowing their preferences may have had an impact on how much they enjoyed and benefitted from certain activities. The intent of this study was to build upon the girls’ strengths, so the pre-group interviews were important for gathering information about their developmental assets and how their relationships contributed to this. The pre-group semi-structured interview protocol is located in Appendix E.

The purpose of the post-group interviews (after week 6) was to gather information related to how the group may have impacted aspects of the girls’ selves, such as their thinking, relationships, ability to cope, and sense of agency, among others. Examples of such questions
were: how the girls feel they have grown and learned from their experience in the program, if they have made any life changes, had any mood changes, and whether they improved peer or adult relationships. For more information on the interviews, please see Appendix F. for the semi-structured interview protocol.

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

Quantitative Measures

The quantitative component of this project included two instruments developed from the foundations of the Relational Cultural Theory. The Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire (see Appendix G.) was used to explore the girls’ perceptions of mutuality in a relationship with a close friend. The Relational Health Indices (see Appendix H.) was used to assess girls’ perceptions of their relationships with the group members, both peer group and mentors. Together, the multiple domains of relational competence and functioning among the girls were assessed.

The Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire (Genero, et al., 1992)

The MPDQ is a measure of perceived mutuality in close relationships. The MPDQ is a 22-item, self-report measure that asks respondents to rate their perceptions of their relationship with someone to whom they feel close, as well as their perceptions of the other’s experience of this relationship. It assesses six conceptual dimensions of mutuality: empathy, engagement, authenticity, zest, diversity, and empowerment (Miller, 1986). The responses to each item are designed to be scored on a 6-point Likert scale (1=never to 6=all of the time), with scoring based
on a mean mutuality score and a higher score indicating higher levels of mutuality. Internal reliability (.86 to .93), test-retest reliability, construct validity, and concurrent validity have been demonstrated with this measure (Genero, et al., 1992).

The Relational Health Indices (Liang, et al., 2002)

The RHI is a 37-item measure comprised of three scales that assess growth-fostering connections with peers (12 items), mentors (11 items), and communities (14 items). The RHI assesses conceptual dimensions of growth-fostering relationships: engagement, authenticity, and empowerment/zest. The responses to each item are designed to be scored by respondents on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always), with a high score on each of these indices indicating a higher degree of relational health (competence) in the context of peer, mentor, and community relationships. Findings demonstrate internal reliability (.72 to .92), convergent and concurrent validity and construct validity (Liang et al., 2002).

Participants

This research project was a collaborative effort of primarily Christina Tortolani and Lindsay Amper, with additional assistance from Amanda Allen. We worked alongside the RALLY program (Responsive Advocacy for Life and Learning in Youth) to develop an after school curriculum for urban, middle school girls. All three researchers came to this project with a masters’ degree in counseling and although each of their foci was different, all three researchers had a feminist and strength-based perspective. It is important to note that all three of the women researchers are Caucasian and from different backgrounds than the girls participating in the program. Christina and Lindsay are from the suburbs of Rhode Island and Amanda is from Tennessee. The cultural, racial, age and educational differences were acknowledged and discussed with the girls participating in the program. Awareness of these cultural differences was
also important throughout the collection of the research data, as it could have potentially impacted the participants’ responses.

Gil Noam, the creator and director of the RALLY program, served as a consultant and an advisor over the development and implementation of the program. He provided the researchers with access to girls in a school and was interested in using the program developed through this project in the RALLY program on a long-term basis. Gil is a developmental and clinical psychologist who is interested in bolstering resiliency in youth especially by means of after school programming. Gil’s interests intersected with the researchers’ on a number of points and as the RALLY goals evolved and changed over time, so did the curriculum. Throughout this collaboration, much work was done to develop a program that was reflective of the researchers’ collaborative goals and desires.

Sarah Bernhardt – Peterson was the on-site school coordinator for the RALLY program and was an important consultant and support throughout the program. She is a licensed social worker and brings a strength-based perspective to the program as well. Sarah was integral to the success of this program as she supported the recruitment of girls and the acquiring of necessary materials. Additionally, Sarah supervised the RALLY master’s level interns, who worked with the students in the school on a more regular basis and therefore were likely to have strong relationships with the girls. The RALLY interns are called RALLY practitioners and they worked three days a week in the school where this research project took place. The practitioners were assigned to a classroom and were responsible for working with every student in their class in some capacity. They helped with schoolwork, provided individual and group counseling services, communicated with students’ parents and provided a number of additional psychosocial services. With the help of Sarah, the researchers made an effort to involve the RALLY interns in
this program by asking for their support in reminding the girls about the program and encouraging them to attend.

Other members of the school community were minimally involved in this program. The teachers were involved in the recruitment process for this program, as the researchers needed access to students during homeroom. The teachers are from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and some have an excellent rapport with students while others do not. In order for this project to be successful, school administrators had to be involved, as they often assisted with room availability and coordination of special events and/or announcements.

Most importantly, adolescent girls from an urban, middle school in the Boston area were the participants of the program. The program was offered to all grade levels and to girls that were and were not members of the RALLY program. Permission slips were sent home with the girls to gain consent for participation in the research study. The girls met as one large group of 11 with all three researchers. The parents of the girls who participated were consulted with before the group began and as necessary throughout the remainder of the program.

Materials

Informed Consent and Permission Slips

A packet containing consent forms were sent home with interested girls. A copy of these forms can be found in Appendix C.

Materials for Groups

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

Setting

This study was conducted in the Mary Curley School in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, an urban neighborhood with a population of 36,293 people and median household income of $46,592, as compared to the state average of $49,959 (http://www.publicschoolreview.com). This neighborhood is made up of a number of distinct historical sub-districts of which there exist several significant Spanish-speaking populations from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. As of 2000, the ethnic make-up of Jamaica Plain was 50% Non-Hispanic White, 23% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Black or African-American, 7% Asian-American, and 3% Other (CityofBoston.gov).

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

The Mary Curley School is 1 of 143 schools in the Boston School District and is a Title 1 school. According to the Department of Education, it serves K-8 and has approximately 650 students, 50.8% male and 49.2% female (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu). The student to teacher ratio is 1:10. The students are 58.4% Hispanic, 23.4% African-American, 13.2% White, 2.9% Asian, 1.6% Multi-race Non-Hispanic, 0.4% Native Hawaiian. 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%). Many of the students in this school are bussed in through the Boston school’s bussing system from other neighborhoods like Dorchester, Mattapan, Roslindale, and Hyde Park.

According to City Data (2007), the student attendance rate is 90.5% which is below the state average of 94.8%. Approximately eighty-seven percent of teachers are licensed in teaching assignment and 86.7% of core academic teachers are identified as highly qualified. When compared to schools nationally and state-wide using accountability standards determined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Mary Curley School is struggling. Based on 2008 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data, this school 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. However, the Curley school is also on target to meet improvement goals. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008).

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

Procedures

In spring of 2008, the researchers developed and ran a pilot program with 5-8 young women at the Mary Curley School. The pilot program ran for six weeks and was used to help the researchers develop a curriculum that would be developmentally appropriate, interesting and helpful to the future participants. A series of questionnaires were used to gather information about what worked and what did not. The young women in the pilot program were not the same girls in the program that was researched in this study and their responses were not a part of this research project; however, their responses helped the researchers to understand the strengths and benefits of their programmatic ideas.

Following approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (Appendix C), participant recruitment for this program began with assistance from RALLY staff in the school. Researchers called the homes of the families of interested girls and explained the program and the informed consent form to the parents/guardians. Once the girls’ returned permission slips and informed consent forms were received, the researchers met with the girls on a weekly basis for 6 weeks from April 2009 through June 2009. Groups were approximately 45 minutes in length and took place within the context of the school’s “POD” curriculum. They were facilitated by at least two of the researchers. Weekly group topics were developed around four general themes and foci: self, relationships, understanding of meaningful events and coping, and vision for the future. These topics were developed using the RALLY program goals (assertion, belonging and reflection), the interest areas of the research team, and information
from the spring 2008 pilot group. Detailed group curriculums (both the curriculum used in this study and its modified version) can be located in Appendix D.

**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. Focus on girls’ developing sense of SELF (cultural, historical, future goals for oneself)

**Weeks 6**: Focus on girls’ plan, VISION for future, summarization of learning and closure

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, prior to the first meeting, each girl was asked to complete a pre-test consisting of the RHI and MPDQ. At the first meeting, the girls were reminded that their participation was voluntary. The concept and limits of confidentiality were discussed as well as group rules. To ensure anonymity, each girl was given a code name (a letter and number) during transcription. Additionally, researchers documented observations after each group. At the conclusion of the 6 weeks, the girls were asked to give feedback about their experience in the program and completed the post-test measures including the evaluation, RHI and MPDQ.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative information from the semi-structured interviews, journals, and process notes were transcribed and qualitatively coded. The coding was inductive because it originates from the raw data (versus from theory or research). The purpose for using this coding method was to make an attempt to maintain the participants’ voice to the greatest extent possible. This coding method was used in combination with a Participatory Action Research approach and/or model.
Thematic models were created from the qualitative sources of information, including the interviews, journals, and process recording.

The quantitative information obtained from the pre and post-test data of RHI and MPDQ were entered and analyzed using SPSS, Version 16.0. Reverse scoring was done to all negative items and then mean scores were calculated for the RHI and MPDQ and respective subtests within these measures. Paired sample t-tests were used to assess for changes in relational competence and mutuality levels following the implementation of the program.
CHAPTER 4

StrongLinks was conceptualized and developed to provide young girls the space to explore and discuss important aspects of their lives, including their connections and relationships. To fully assess and evaluate the effectiveness and fit of the program, a mixed methodology was utilized. This included qualitative information collected through researcher observation, notes, group materials (e.g., journals) and pre and post-group semi-structured interviews with the girls. A quantitative analysis of pre and post-group scores on the RHI and MPDQ was also conducted. This chapter will present both elements of the data. It will begin with a description of the participants in order to contextualize and capture the girls’ individual perspective and life experiences.

The Girls of StrongLinks

All 11 participants of the StrongLinks program were middle school students at the Mary Curley School in Massachusetts. A pseudonym was assigned to each girl to ensure anonymity. The girls’ ages ranged from 12-14 years-old. Nine of the girls were in 7th grade and the remaining two were in 8th grade. The 7th graders were mostly from the same homeroom, so they already knew each other and had pre-established relationships (with the exception of Adrie). The girls represented varying cultural backgrounds, including Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, Dominican, Cuban, Brazilian, Salvadorian, Haitian and Caucasian.

During the time of the group, the girls all lived in urban communities of Boston. Previously, however, several of the girls had recently moved to the Boston area from either other parts of the U.S. or their native countries. The girls described their neighborhoods as safe “sometimes.” They noted there was often gang violence (“there is a lot of shooting”), parties “down the street” and people “asking [me] to hang out…but I don’t want to.” Some of the girls
stated they did not feel safe walking home alone after school while others felt safer because “everybody looks out for [me].”

During the pre-group interview, the girls were asked open-ended questions about their backgrounds, relationships, stress and strengths, among other things. The girls were encouraged to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable. These interviews were given by the same co-researcher (who was connected to 3-4 girls in a mentoring role) to facilitate a safe, trusting relationship. Each girl contributed to what became StrongLinks, a program that was built from the girls’ willingness to share the realities and truths of their lives. These girls, StrongLink’s coresearchers, shared their sense of selves and below are brief narratives that depict how the girls initially described themselves, their home life, cultural background and significant relationships during the pre-group interviews.

- Adrie, 13, is Puerto Rican. She described herself as “cool, unique and very sassy.” She lives with her mother and sister and noted they recently moved back to the Boston area from Maine (where they lived for one year). Although she identified herself as Catholic, her family rarely “gets to church.” When asked ‘what do you worry about in your home, if anything,’ she stated “money, health and safety” of her family.

At the time of the interview, Adrie rated her level of “stress” a 7/10. She identified her mother and sister to be the most important people in her life because “I trust them and they protect me.” Although Adrie described having one close friend outside of school (who lives across the street from her grandmother), she shared that making friends in school has been hard for her and she prefers to
spend time with family. When asked if she had a mentor, she stated, “No, but I want one- how do you get one of those?”

Adrie identified singing as a personal strength and shared how proud she is of her sister’s ability to sing. Her sister attends a charter high school for musically gifted teens and she hopes to follow in her sister’s path. She would like to become a lawyer and her dream for the future is to “be a mom and have lots of cars and money.”

- Ina, 12, is Brazilian and described herself as “fun, energetic and quiet.” She lived in Brazil from 2005-2007 and recalled this as a “fun” experience where she learned to read and write in Portuguese. She lives with her parents and younger sister, 11. Her father works long hours and doesn’t get home until after 7pm. She is very close to her mother. Her family is Christian and they attend church every week. She identified her parents and grandmother to be the most important people in her life because “they are always there for me… if I get hurt or something, they will be there.”

Ina shared that her sister has been sick and this has been hard for her family to deal with. Ina also noted that she had to break up with her boyfriend because they were “caught kissing” in the school auditorium. When her father was informed of this, he made her cut off her hair; “I think he just wanted me to look ugly so no one would date me.” She rated her current level of perceived stress as 5/10. Ina identifies herself as a “leader” among her classmates and shared about a recent service trip to St. Croix. She was also recently chosen to speak on behalf of her class at a school ceremony.
Kristen, 14, is Caucasian and described herself as “nice, caring, trustworthy and honest” and “good at expressing myself.” She lives with her father, grandmother, twin brother and cousin. She noted having 11 siblings (one passed away). Over the last few years, Kristen has moved around quite a bit; she has lived in Florida with her grandmother for a period of time and 2 neighboring towns in Boston. Kristen noted a strained relationship with her mother who “lies a lot” and she doesn’t “trust her.” She is not allowed to see her mother. Her grandmother (who is “inspiring and a good role model”) and her father are important to her because “they’re always there when I need them.” Her older sister is also a source of mentorship because “she always tells you the truth and is honest with you.” Kristen defined the stress in her life as “a lot of pain and anger built up” and rated her current stress level a 3/10. She hopes to be a pediatrician some day and her dream for the future is for her family to be “healthy and safe.”

Mabelle, 13, is Puerto Rican and described herself as “cheerful…my personality is good. I can be playful, but I can be serious.” She lives with her father, step-mother and step-siblings and has limited contact to her mother (who lost custody of the children). She is Christian and noted the family has not attended church since her father broke his leg. She has lived in the same town her entire life, which she described as dangerous- “I don’t feel safe all the time. My brother is in a gang and the rival gang lives near me.” Two of her older brothers are incarcerated and she does not maintain contact with them. She also has several siblings who live in Puerto Rico.
She identified her two younger sisters (who are in foster care) as significant relationships in her life because “all my life I’ve been the mother and taken care of them and I haven’t seen them in 5 months.” She rated her stress level as 7/10. She admires her older sister who she described as “really successful. She's…a doctor’s assistant and they pay her- she just got a raise- like $600 and something … she has to pay the bills, but its good cause that's a lot of money. She's trying to buy her own house…she's saving money up in her bank, she's supportive of her children, and they are really supportive of her even though they are really young.” Mabelle identified her strengths as “my sense of fashion” and “I care- I care about a lot of things.” She dreams of becoming a fashion designer “like Kimora Lee Simmons.”

- Tina, 12, described herself as “outgoing, cool to hang out with and down to earth.” She was born in El Salvador and moved here when she was a toddler. She lives with her parents, younger brother and sister. She described herself as a “daddy’s girl.” Her aunt and uncle also live in this town and she sees them at least once per week. She identified her parents and two best friends as the most important people in her life because “I like them … we can have fun but then again we can work together.”

    She noted school is also important to her and considers herself to be hard-working and is proud her teachers think she is smart. Tina noted an area of stress for her is her responsibilities at home, including babysitting her brother (who is one and a half years old). When asked what the facilitators can do to help her feel comfortable, Tina responded by saying, “First thing, when I’m talking, you got to
listen to me or I’ll feel mad.” Tina’s hopes for the future include attending the Boston Arts Academy and “to reach my goals and always have the people I love there.”

- Kendra, 14, is Cuban and when asked to describe herself, she stated: “I would tell you the bad parts about me. I really would. So I would say: there’s my bad attitude problem, and I might explode over one little thing. And then there are the good things—I am talented, I can be there for you, I can show you love if you need it, the love that you want and need.” Although she lives with her parents and two older sisters (ages 16 and 20), she sees her grandmother almost every day; “I stay with her and not with my parents a lot of days…my parents aren’t always there when I need them.”

One of her older sisters is her “mentor” because “she has gone through a lot of stuff in her life…and she guides me to a positive rather than a negative path.” Kendra identified her ability to give advice and “be there” for the people in her life as character strengths. She shared her level of stress was a 9/10 because she has been experiencing family illness, deaths and members “being deported and going away.” Her hope for the future is “to keep living my life. Not much drama. Have everyone together, peace on earth, everyone together. Go to college, get my degree, to do what I need to do.”

- Alexia, 14, is Haitian and described herself as “quiet and independent” during the pre-group interview. She answered most questions by saying, “I don’t know.” She lives with her mother, brother, 10, and sister, 8. Her mother is an important relationship in her life because “she is there when I need her.” She noted that the
MCAS is a source of stress for her right now (4/10). She hopes to go to college and become a pediatrician.

- Nina, 14, is in the 8th grade. She was born in the Dominican Republic and moved to the U.S. when she was 3 years old. She shared that some of her family still lives in her native country (aunts, uncles and grandmother) and come to visit periodically. She noted she has not seen her grandmother in six years. She described herself by stating, “I would say I am an outgoing person. I like having fun, making people laugh on the inside. I’m caring and helpful.” She lives with her mother and younger sister. She included her mom, sister and boyfriend (of 1.5 years) as important relationships in her life. “I feel like I connect with all of them, have a lot of things in common with them. I would…do anything to make them smile. I feel like my family ….my friends are part of my family. And my boyfriend hangs there too, he’s part of the family now but, you know, that took time.”

Nina identified playing baseball, dancing and writing as things she is good at and enjoys. However, she noted she struggles with her body image; “Well, I might be friendly and stuff, and I look happy but…I have really low self-esteem. For me…to look in the mirror, I look but I don’t see a happy person. Then I go outside and act happy. I don’t like my physical appearance.” When asked if other aspects of her life may be stressful, Nina shared her mother being sick, taking care of her sister and getting good grades as sources of stress. She rated her level of stress a 5/10.
She plans to attend a vocational high school and become a meteorologist. “My first dream is me being happy with a family. But I want my mom to be in a comfortable place where I can see her and she’s safe. I want a comfortable life. Not a rich, rich, rich life, but you know, comfortable.”

- April, 14, is in 8th grade. She stated, “I like to yell and I like to have fun.” She lives with her mother (who is from the Dominican Republic) and two younger brothers. She spends summers in the DR with her maternal grandmother (her dad also lives there). Her parents and brothers are the most important people in her life because they “are my family. They are always with me.” She identified a character strength as being helpful to other people; when asked what she is good at, she replied, “talking- I like to yell a lot!”

April takes care of her brothers after school while her mom works in a chocolate factory and she noted this sometimes stresses her out (2/10). April has been accepted into two different high schools and shared that her mother wants her to go to one while she wants to go to the other. In the future, she would like to become a detective or teacher.

- Synthia, 12, is Guatemalan and described herself as “serious, but only when I have to be. I’m weird and funny, sweet, and I like to be nice to people and I don’t like it when somebody is left out ‘cuz I know how that feels sometimes. I want to include everybody. I am nice. I’m like a short, little teddy bear.” She lives with her parents and younger brother. She described her neighborhood as violent with “shootings.” While she reasoned its “okay” to walk home by herself after school
on some days and “it depends on who is around at that time,” she’d rather not walk alone because she doesn’t feel safe.

Her family (including her aunts and uncles) and two best friends are most important to her because “they are the only ones I can actually trust. They are the ones who have been through a lot of stuff with me. They helped me grow up and taught me what I need to know.” Both of Synthia’s parents were born in Guatemala; she visited for the first time two years ago and met her grandfather. She identified a personal strength as, “I don’t like to be like everybody else… I don’t like to be so mean like some of those girls that act ‘all that’- I’m just funny.”

Synthia rated her level of stress at 3/10 and noted current sources of stress include tests in school, boys, problems with friends/ family and “stuff that you think about by yourself like when you think something is wrong about yourself, but its okay.” Synthia would like to become a veterinarian and “have a nice house and a nice relationship with family and friends. And a nice job that pays nice money.”

- Maria, 13, was born in Puerto Rico and moved to Boston at age 2. She described herself as an “honest person, kind and trustworthy. Whatever people say to me, I respect and they can trust me.” She lives with her parents, and older brother, 20, and sister, 17. Maria loves her neighborhood and enjoys taking care of the young children. “The lil’ kids love me. I’m a leader to them- they have somebody to look up to.”
Her family is very important to her. “I’m closest to my mom. My dad is stricter. He says he made mistakes and now he is trying to protect me…. Dad needs to trust me and believe in me. He thinks that I’m going to do bad stuff and if he gets to trust me, I’ll respect him and I’ll do what he says, but he don’t trust me at all.” Most of her family still resides in Puerto Rico and she visits almost every summer; “Its beautiful. I love it there.” She expressed pride that her brother attends college and she values the advice he gives her; he wants her to wait to have a boyfriend and taught her a “relationship doesn’t just mean sex, it means trust and friendship.” Maria’s sister is also a strong influence in her life as well. She shared that her sister got pregnant at age 15 and her father “freaked out.” Her sister had an abortion. She reasoned, “that’s why I think that my father doesn’t trust me. When I say I’m going to a party, my dad says you know what happened [to your sister].” She rated her current level of stress at 5/10.

Maria hopes to attend the same high school her older siblings attended. Her long-term goal is to do the “best I can in school… get all my stuff together so I can have good grades and get to college or something.” She dreams of becoming a hip-hop dancer or nurse.

Group Information

StrongLinks was developed for 9 weeks, but due to academic constraints beyond the co-researchers’ control, the program was limited to 6 weeks over the course of 3 months. During weeks 1, 2 and 5, all girls were present for the group. During week 3, Maria was absent; week 4, Kendra was absent; and week 6, Nina was absent. All 3 co-researchers were present for groups, with the exception of 1 absence. This co-researcher was present for all groups. Although efforts
were made to meet with each girl before and after the StrongLinks program, Nina was absent and not able to complete the post-group interview and one of the girls chose not to be taped.

_The Shared Development of StrongLinks_

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

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

**Week 1:**

- The girls arrived sporadically and some seemed hesitant to enter the classroom. The girls sat around the table, joking with one another, but not really interacting with group facilitators. Two facilitators began the group, but the girls seemed hesitant to begin talking about rules and barely spoke. When the third facilitator walked in with food, the entire mood of the group changed. The girls became vibrant, talkative, but also jumped for the food, demonstrating difficulty sharing the food with their peers.

- Following the game, Lindsay brought up the treasure boxes. The room filled with screams of joy, “Are we decorating those?!?” The girls clamored to get their hands on the boxes that they wanted, and asked if they would be able to start today. They were also excited about the beading project that was introduced, and were eager to pick their first bead. The energy in the room dramatically increased.
This session led to a number of realizations and ultimately, changes to the curriculum:

1. The didactic nature of the rule-setting was not effective. It seemed the girls needed a visual and concrete way to express their opinions. As a result, rather than simply writing the rules that they had come up with on a poster, the co-researchers shifted this part of the project to the collaborative creation of a “hand collage.” The girls each traced their hands and wrote expectations or rules that they wanted for the group on their hands. During the evaluation period, one of the girls offered a suggestion to further improve this activity by having each girl make their own hand in their own space. She suggested that this would help reduce chaos. This change was made in the final iteration of this curriculum.

2. Snacks had a big impact on the mood and the energy of the group. However, with the increased energy came arguments about sharing the food. Future sessions were modified so that snacks were more structured and each girl was given a certain helping. This systematic process of providing snacks seemed to reduce anxiety and conflict around getting food. Rather than yelling at each other, each girl waited for their snack or offered it to others if they were not hungry.

3. Again, it was clear that talking was not as powerful as action. Based on their unenthused response when there was discussion of the planned activities, a more hands-on, visual approach was used. For example, the wooden boxes were shown to them instead of just talking about the activity to provide a visual of upcoming art projects.

Week 4:

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

- The girls sat down and immediately began working on their hope boxes. April stated, “you guys never give us enough time to finish these.” Many of the girls were reluctant to put their projects away again and it took time to get transition to the next activity.

- When it came time to transitioning from the hope box to a conversation around stress, Maria asked if we could talk about sex. The facilitators agreed to this as long as this was what the girls wanted to discuss. The girls clearly needed to discuss this today, as many of them quickly picked up on the conversation.

- Maria asked, “if you had sex with a lot of people, were you a ‘ho’?” Lindsay threw that question back to the group. The girls seemed to think that if a girl had sex with a lot of different people who did not care about you, you might be. Lindsay encouraged them to think about the difference standards for girls and boys. They again picked up on this conversation, stating that boys were considered “cool” if they had sex with lots of people. Many of the girls focused on this “good girl” phenomenon and on being a virgin. All of the girls insisted that they were virgins and this seemed to be an important point to communicate. At the same time, many of the girls were smirking when saying this. They used the word “innocent” over and over again, each one arguing that they were “innocent” and that another girl was not.

- When Christina asked them about linking sex with stress, they noted that sex could cause stress but also reduce stress. Christina also asked if it was more stressful for girls, and they noted that it could lead to pregnancy or STDs and that the guy would leave. One of
the girls stated that pregnancy is the guy’s responsibility too, but others reminded her that
guys have the option to leave and often do.

- There was no time to introduce the activity on stress today. The girls needed time to talk
about this topic and had a lot to say. The conversation transitioned to other forms of
stress, aside from sex, which they said included siblings, parents, and homework.

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

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

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

Quantitative Results

Reliability

Reliability analyses using Cronbach’s alpha were conducted on both the MPDQ and RHI. The reliability of the MPDQ was found to be .85 and .80 pre-test and post-test, respectively. The reliability of the RHI pre-test was .94 and .76 post-test. Overall, these alphas indicate acceptable reliability for both measures.

MPDQ: Assessing Perceived Mutuality

A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine whether girls’ levels of perceived mutuality were affected by the group experience. The results indicated that no significant differences were found in levels of perceived mutuality; the mean level of mutuality at post-group (M=5.18; SD=.39) was not significantly greater than pre-group (M=4.95, SD=.43), t(8)=-1.84, p=.10. The mean ranges for their responses were 4.27-5.70 and 4.41-5.66 pre and post-group, respectively. The results were similar when looking at the two subscales of the MPDQ (self and friend). On the MPDQ-self subscale, the pre-group (M=4.97, SD=.61) and post-group means (M=5.30, SD=.29), t (6)= -1.49, p=.19 were not significantly different. Likewise, on the MPDQ-friend subscale, the pre-group mean (M=5.05, SD=.41) did not differ from the post-group (M=5.19, SD=.43), t (8)= -1.49, p=.17. These results indicate that “most of the time,” the girls perceived mutuality in relationships with close friends both before and after the group.

RHI: Assessing Relational Competence

A series of paired sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether aspects of girls’ growth-fostering connections were affected by the group experience. T-tests were carried out to
assess for change in the RHI- composite score, for each of the three indices (peer, mentor and community) and the three subscales (energy/zest, authenticity and empathy/engagement). Please see Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

The results indicated no significant differences in measures of the RHI composite pre-group (M=3.81, SD=.65) to post-group (M=3.76, SD=.33), t(2)=-.217, p=.85. Similarly, there were no significant differences in measures of the relational health subscales from pre to post-group with levels of energy/zest: t (3)= .473, p=.67; authenticity: t (6)=2.29, p=.06), or empathy/engagement: t (4)= -2.19, p=.84. These results indicate that the girls reported experiencing energy/zest, authenticity and empathy in relationships “sometimes to always” pre and post-group, with authenticity being the highest. Finally, the results indicated no significant differences in measures of the relational health indices from pre to post-group amongst their peer group: t (6)= -.096, p=.93; mentor: t (3)=.180, p=.87), or community: t (6)= .362, p=.73. These results indicate that the girls reported experiencing perceived support and mutuality within all three groups pre and post-group. Overall, these results show that the girls showed high levels of growth- fostering connections with peers (with means ranging from 2.92-4.75), mentors (3.00-4.82) and lower levels within their community (2.07-4.79).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Relational Health Indices and Subscales

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<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Post-Group</th>
<th>t</th>
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<td>-.217</td>
<td>.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.362</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Results

The co-developers of StrongLinks hoped to help create a program for girls to express their voices and explore the unique meanings of their life experiences, identities and development. It was hoped that by meeting and identifying issues relevant to their lives, the girls would find a place to brainstorm and exchange ideas of how to problem-solve to address these issues. Finally, providing a context where their relationships, strengths and resources become the vehicle for their own empowerment, the girls would be able to reflect and make change to affect their lives.

Feminist and qualitative methods were employed to capture the lens and voice of the girls. Therefore, the sources of data included focus groups, the girls’ journals, pre and post-group interviews, and co-researcher notes. The current analysis was approached through transcription of interviews, and careful reading of the data over several phases. Phase 1 consisted of reading each girl’s interviews, line by line, and making notes about her perspective on relationships and experiences in the program. Emerging themes resulted from the use of a framework guided by research questions. The second phase consisted of re-reading each girl’s interview for recurring themes that surfaced for many of the girls. Thus, each girl’s transcriptions were read both for individual (specific) themes and more broad (group) themes. The third phase was to combine each of the girls’ individual themes into one working document from which the other elements of the data were integrated. The fourth phase concerned the
faithfulness and credibility of the analyses whereupon the co-researchers “checked” each other’s thematic analyses.

As a result, the following themes (organized by research questions) are believed to represent common themes among and between the girls and to be interwoven from the girls’ voices, life experiences and meanings made through the StrongLinks program.

Research Question 1:

Multiple ways girls speak about and understand themselves and their relationships

*Speaking about relationships*

Throughout the course of StrongLinks, many of the girls became open and engaged when discussing the various relationships in their lives- with family, friends, romantic partners and school staff. They did not shy away from sensitive issues, but rather, faced them with brutal honesty and candor because “that’s how it is.” As the group dynamic developed, it became evident that there were various ways of communicating and contributing to the group. That is, some girls’ voices were louder than others.’ And while the quieter voices remained equally respected, they represented a different presence in the group.

*Understand themselves in relationships: “It tells you who you are”*

As Ina poignantly described, being in a relationship is “a process” that “helps you be a person.” Thus, the girls’ relationships are sometimes reflective of who they are- helping to shape and define them. However, they can also be stressful; in fact, sometimes, “it’s the relationships themselves” that “adds a lot of stress.” And this defines them, too. For Adrie, “The way I act with other people in relationships doesn’t change who I am… I am a very truthful and strong girl and I go through a lot.”
Although relationships can be a source of support and nurturance, it appears important for the girls to express their independence and ability to take care of others. As Mabelle stated, “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 am strong- that once in awhile, I can support them.” It is clear from Mabelle’s words that she identifies part of herself through both her caretaking actions and self-sufficiency. “I have always had a lot of responsibility.” The girls also identified being upfront (and sometimes confrontational) as part of being in relationships. The girls will “say it to your face” because they are not “scared” to use their voices to express truths even when it’s painful.

The girls’ cultural selves/ awareness

When discussing the girls’ perceptions of cultural differences and stereotypes during the pre-group interviews, they offered varying perspectives and experiences. Synthia shared that sometimes peers tease her because of her appearance.

Synthia: They think I’m Chinese. Which is kind of mean, but I always have something to say back to them.
Interviewer: Do they call you names?
Synthia: They call you chinita, not really bad, sometimes just gets on my nerves, so sometimes I have something to say back.

Kristin spoke to the presence of stereotypes about being a white girl. “I don’t really pay attention to stereotypes...there are expectations (as a girl) to act a certain way and only do certain jobs and stuff.” She believed “Everyone is equal and not judged...for stereotypes.” Ina, on the other hand, shared that her mother expects her to dress and act like Brazilian girls. “In home, when I wear basketball shirts, mom gets mad at me...when I eat, mom says I need to stand up straight and I get aggravated.” She also spoke to a stereotype that because she is Brazilian, people think...
she can dance, “but I can’t.” Maria felt that there is a stereotype that girls “are supposed to wash dishes” and do other household chores.

When addressing the issue of privilege and poverty, several girls mentioned that having money makes things easier, “like actresses have more money,” while others thought how much money a family had made no difference because “some people can be richer than others, but their problems at home could be different.” With the exception of a brief discussion on the topic of “where are you from” (which was initiated by Mabelle), the girls appeared to want to talk about other aspects of their lives more than their cultural selves.

_Growth-fostering aspects of relationships_

As the girls shared what qualities were necessary for a growth-fostering relationship, several themes surfaced. These included feeling connected, trust, expressing emotions honestly, authenticity, mutuality and a shared history. During the interview, many of the girls spoke about their peers and siblings as sources of connection (but not their parents). When asked, “What does it feel like to be really connected to someone in a relationship,” Kristin stated, “It feels good to know you have someone there and you don’t have to go through everything in life alone. They’re there to help you and pick you up when you fall.” Several of the other girls echoed this sentiment when talking about friends who become “like my second family.” For the girls, having a close friend “feels good,” supportive and comforting.

The girls also shared that its important to actively “work hard on them” to make their friendships “stronger.” Kendra described a friendship as “good” if “I can express my feelings to that person.” Thus, an integral part of being in a caring relationship is sharing “what we feel and what we want to feel.” Although emotions can be difficult to experience, the girls hold that by sharing them, their relationships grow stronger. In addition, “being real” and not “pretending to
be someone you’re not” also sustains this shared sense of relationship. This ability to be real and authentic in their relationships was heard over and over in StrongLinks.

Threaded through these components of connectedness was the important presence of a shared history or sense of relatedness. To the girls, having common life experiences with their friends meant a nonjudgmental attitude, understanding and empathy in relationships. Ina explained, “I tell her (my best friend) everything and like, she doesn’t judge because she’s been through that, too.” For many of the girls, their concept of trust was intimately tied to a feeling of being understood. Kendra determines if a person is trustworthy by “what they go through and they see personal information about me, then I can probably relate to them and tell that person what I go through, too.” Likewise, a friend may not be trustworthy if “I feel like they don’t understand” (Mabelle).

When asked, “what do you think the word “mutuality” means and whether it is important to have in relationships?” Synthia stated, “So its like, they listen to me and I listen to them. It’s the same as give and take. So they help me and I help them.” Thus, being open with one another and being there for each other (both emotionally and physically) creates a mutual relationship. “Because when you tell your world to somebody, you would expect for them to do the same for you- like karma- if you give something to somebody, you expect them to give it back (Ina).” Similarly, Maria stated, “I have done favors for my best friend and when I have, when I needed help from her she comes to help me ‘cuz she knows I helped her. She thinks about, ‘oh, she did this for me, so I should do this for her.’ So, yeah, I think that is important in a relationship.”

Most of the girls agreed with Synthia and Maria that mutuality is important to have in a relationship. They also shared that mutuality is often easier to have within their friendships (as compared to with their parents).
Growth Fostering Relationships

As the girls shared which people they felt close to at this point in their lives, many of the girls included their best friends, sisters and sometimes a parental/guardian figure. It seemed easier for the girls to feel connected to other girls their age who share similar experiences with them. And although they consider their parents among the most important relationships in their lives, connecting to them was not as easy. The girls felt that within their families, their sisters were a place for connection and even maternal protection. They served the role of “othermothers”. Kendra stated, “I can always talk to one of my sisters about that (her sexuality). It’s like she’s my mother even though she’s not.” Similarly, Adrie’s older sister helped her feel protected and loved. “She acts like she’s my…a real mother, like she says tell her if my stepmother ever hurts me or like ends up screaming at me, to call her. ‘Cause she’s going to deal with her…it feels really good. I love her.”

“Knots” and disconnections in relationships

During week 2 of the program, the girls were asked to participate in an activity called The Human Knot. This activity involved the girls standing in a circle, reaching across and taking the hand of another girl in the circle. They then repeated this with their left hand; the end result created a “human knot.” The group then tried to unravel the "human knot" by unthreading their bodies without letting go of each other's hands. Once the girls completed this activity, the co-researchers linked the activity to the metaphor of a “knotty relationship”. The girls were asked what they think it's like to be in a relationship when things are all “knotted,” how these “knots” may lead to feeling disconnected in a relationship and how they can work through these differences in relationships.

“Knotty” relationships: How it feels
When asked to brainstorm what constitutes qualities of “knots” or disconnection in relationships, the girls came up with the words, “flirting, lying, cheating, ‘he said/ she said,’ drama, backstabbing, arguments, problems, fighting, conflict, anger and unloving.” When describing how disconnection feels, Kendra shared, “Like, sometimes it can hurt really badly. Like if you’re really close to that person, like you build a friendship with them, it can be a real hard struggle. If there’s a knot in that relationship, and that’s a person you are really, really close with, it’s gonna hurt because you’re always gonna want that person in your life.” Ina spoke to how it can preoccupy and worry her by stating, “I feel exhausted because I think about it over and over.”

Maria described a situation with a friend when she began to feel disconnected and felt the relationship changed because there was an emotional distance between them. “It feels to me like she, like somebody told her something about me or she thinks I did something so I feel like she is like backing up away from me, like, I'm not saying like completely, cuz she actually still smiles at me, she has the greatest time with me, we still do things together, but not like we used to.”

Kristin talked about how “if you feel disconnected, you don't feel totally open to that person...with feelings.” Ina also felt that holding back your true emotions happens “sometimes because you don't want to hurt the person's feelings.” But she also asserted that trying to be honest is important to help resolve the “knot.” “You gonna say the truth...cause you are trying to take the conflict out. Cause if you lie, its just gonna make it worse.”

During Week 3, the one of the group’s themes was sources of stress. The girls initiated a discussion by stating, “can we talk about sex?” With the exception of Ina and Nina (who asserted themselves by stating this conversation made them feel uncomfortable), the girls talked and expressed themselves openly. Points of conversation included: is a girl a “ho” if she sleeps with
a boy? The girls agreed that someone is a “ho” if she sleeps with many boys, but not if its just one boy. The girls were upset when considering a double standard that exists: A boy who sleeps with many girls is a “man whore,” but no one calls him this; in fact, he receives praise for this behavior. The girls also asked: Why do boys leave girls after they have had sex with them and then talk about it with their male friends? It seemed evident from the conversation that the girls find that sexual relationships with boys often lead to a “knotty” relationship. During her interview, Maria processed her experience of this conversation and concluded “bad stuff happens with boys. It happens to every girl” and reasoned, “I think that in middle school we should just have fun. Yeah, we … all girls like boys, all girls like boys, that's normal, but I think that, like, in middle school, dating, is not so good.”

“Girl fighting” is also a source of disconnection for the girls and seems to happen when girls struggle to find an alternative way to resolve the conflict and feel the need to “stand up for [yourself].” Adrie described, “its like... these days girls talk a lot of trash- it gets annoying so you just want to fight them.” Kristin shared that fighting happens “because sometimes they (girls) have different points of view and its really hard to talk about it, so its easier to fight them about it.” Synthia stated she would first talk to the person she was in conflict with, but “if they got physical, I’d get physical back.” Kendra noted “my mom taught me that that person can talk so much crap about you. But the day they put their hands on you, that’s the day you fight them. And if you don’t fight them don’t come home complaining about that they touched you, that they beat your ass.”

However, some of the girls thought fighting was not helpful. Ina thought “to deal with it, you can talk to the person. Fighting makes it worse ‘cause you hurt the person and yourself.” Ina reasoned that fighting happens “because the anger is too much for them- they just wanna be
tough and stand up for their selves. It’s not really going to resolve anything.” She came to conclude that although fighting allows girls to “let out [your] anger…the conflict’s still going to be there.” So, fighting may help in the short-term, but doesn’t help the relationship in the long-term.

*Disconnection with parents/ caregivers: “I’m not feeling my parents right now”*

As mentioned earlier, for most of the girls, their family represented a source of deep connection; however, some girls spoke about disconnection with parental (and caregiver) relationships during middle school. Kendra explained, “I just can’t talk to my parents about certain things. I mean they won’t even let me finish talking and they go ballistic- ‘what do you mean?’ and ‘what are you talking about.’ And its like, I just can’t talk to my parents about a lot of things, they don’t even give me a chance to talk and they get really mad over little things I say. So, its like my friends boost me more than my parents which is kind of sad.” Kristin also felt “its kinda hard with family…your family’s there for you no matter what…like there are some problems you wouldn’t talk to them about and go to your friends.”

Mabelle, who lives with her father, was particularly vocal about her mother and the anger she feels because of her mother’s lack of caretaking towards herself and her two younger siblings (who are now in foster care).

My mom- I just feel so ashamed of her because...she didn't have, like, if, like she's gonna raise them in a way that shameful...she takes them to the food pantry...the women's shelter...they just be moving back and forth and back and forth...it pisses me off because the ...where she moved, she moved to Randolph and that has no public transportation, I don't want my sisters walking by themselves to school...that’s a 10-year-old and a 5-year-old...I don't like that. And my sister's birthday is coming up, the little, little one, in August, and I don't think I'm going to be there so ...

One of Mabelle’s journal entries was to her sister and was a testament of her love and care for her sisters.
“Dear Bubu,
I have to talk to you about what’s going on with everything. How’s life living with you aunt as your foster mother. Is its okay? Does she keep everything on check? Are you getting your 8 hours of sleep? Did Adriana stop wetting the bed? Sorry to ask all these questions it’s just as your older sister I want to make sure everything’s okay. I love you!”

Adrie also expressed having a stressful relationship with her mother’s boyfriend (who she lives with). She had difficulty describing him, stating, “Its his attitude, the way he acts...he acts like a child. …the things he does- he lies a lot to my mom and to me. Its just the things he does- I can't explain it.” In her journal she wrote,

“I want to tell my mom to break up with her boyfriend cause I don’t like him. I hate his guts. No one in my family likes him. I just want her to break up with him.”

Here, Adrie communicated how hard a disconnection can be and her way of coping was to “ignore him.”

Witnessing and experiencing trauma

As the girls shared about their lives, many of them talked about witnessing and encountering traumatic experiences, including death and loss, illness, and violence. Kendra explained,

If it’s happens in my family—like death—it just keeps happening…Right now, in my family, there has been a lot of sickness and deaths happening…so, I am Cuban and 10 different other things…and family members are being deported and going away.

Several of the girls shared about how family members’ illnesses caused them worry, concern and stress. Nina shared about her mother’s illness. “Well, my mom is very sick (thromosis). I am always taking care of her and my little sister.” Ina also expressed concern over her younger sister who is chronically ill and how it is hard for her to be patient and understanding with her sister all the time. Mabelle shared how she thinks about her younger siblings and if “something bad is happening because I protected them. Its hard because I want to make sure they are safe.”
Maria recalled with vivid detail the evening she and her family found out her older sister became pregnant at 15. Finally, Adrie spoke to her experience of witnessing violence in relationships “cuz like I guess I seen it happen, so I don't like it at all. I don't like it… Cuz that topic (physical abuse in relationships) is like, I don't want to cry, its like, um, like I seen it before, and I don't want it to happen again.”

Working thru “knots” in relationships: What helps

The girls spoke about several strategies to deal with difference or conflict in relationships, including “thinking equally,” taking into consideration “other people’s perspective and point of view on everything,” “getting it straight,” “being real” and letting “space go and think[ing] about it.” However, Ina commented on “how it’s difficult to get out (of the knot). Its easy to get in, but hard to get out.”

The girls agreed that although dealing with the “knots” are hard, it’s important for the growth of the relationship so the knot doesn’t get “bigger.” Kristin thought it’s easy to deal with the knot when it’s little “cause when it gets bigger, there's more problems… yeah, but I think if you fix it when the problem is small you can work it out.” Synthia deals with knots based on what the conflict is about. If it’s something important to her, she let’s that person know directly.

I confront them. It depends on the situation, like I said. If it was like, like I said before, if it was somebody talking about me, I would confront them. If it was something stupid, like I don't get it at all, then I would pull away, like I don't want to hang out with that person. I wouldn't really talk to them.

And as Kendra stated, addressing conflict allows girls to be more authentic and real with each other.

I think it’s important to deal with that knot when you start getting into the personal information in the relationship, and you start coming clean to people, and you can start showing more of you rather than being fake to that person. Like you just open up to that person. Like, I think that’s when the knots can come out and the struggles because what if that person doesn’t understand you, or understand where you are coming from.
Research Question 2:

Girls’ experience of StrongLinks

A central and defining component of the StrongLinks program was the use of artistic activities as an avenue for emotional expression and connection as well as a way for the girls to express themselves and aspects of their lives. These activities took the form of journaling, creating a “Hope box,” runes, and role-playing, among others. Since this was a participatory action project, the girls input, ideas and feelings about each group session was highly valued and integrated to shape the program’s curriculum. Through the qualitative analysis, several themes about the girls’ experiences surfaced.

*The power of art and voice*

Mabelle captured the voice of several of the girls when speaking to the process of doing and creating art while talking and connecting about their lives.

> Yeah- it (working on the art projects) kinda distracts you...like for example, a lot of people aren't really comfortable talking about their personal lives but when you are doing an activity you feel ok I guess and it kinda distracts you and you are actually talking about things...that's what I think.

Kristin similarly commented how the art made for “better” conversation about topics that are otherwise hard to talk about, “because you didn't have to focus on that- you didn't have to just sit there and focus on that (the conversation).” It appears that the art allowed for a more gentle and indirect way of connecting, relating and discussing significant aspects of their lives. For example, the Human Knot activity allowed for discussion about relationships where “you got to know more about the girls and what is important to them in their life” (Maria).

When asked what activities they liked and disliked, the girls’ answers varied, especially when considering the journaling portion of the group. Several of the girls found the journaling to
be meaningful because “writing it in a journal can take it off [her] mind. It’s better to express it in a journal than hold it in and holding grudges in [her] mind” (Kendra). Mabelle also liked the journals “because it feels like all that stuff is being put on that paper...like even though its not directly talking to somebody, you feel better after you write it out.”

Ina spoke about a journal exercise that asked the girls to “write a letter to somebody in your life that you need to talk to about something very important. This may be somebody who you have not been able to verbally communicate with about this topic.” She wrote to her younger sister (who was ill) about how she was sorry she yelled and became frustrated with her. She recalled, “after I did that letter to my sister, I felt better about myself.” Several of the girls also described liking the process of the co-researchers writing back to them in their journals because “you guys listened to us and you knew, and you actually wrote back to us.”

Of the girls who did not like the writing (which was the majority), they felt “bored” by the journals because it was “too much like school.” They expressed that they would rather do other activities and “we just want to have fun.” It is also possible that the writing portion of the group was poorly timed since it was the last 5 minutes of the group and thus, it may have been hard for the girls to transition from other, more active expressive activities to this one.

*Importance of PAR and “Girls Only” Programming*

In evaluating the program, it became evident how critical participatory action was to the success of StrongLinks. The girls expressed how having “freedom” to “pick our own things” allowed for a group space where “we actually did the things we wanted to do.” The girls also appreciated feeling “listening to.” For example, Mabelle shared how “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.” Maria shared about a past group experience and contrasted to her experience in StrongLinks.

I liked the fact that you guys let us go up there and pick whichever bead we want and… Cuz I think that, like the fact that girls went up there and they get to pick out their own beads, I think that was pretty cool. Cuz I used to have a pod similar to this back in Florida, but it was like nothing like this. They used to like pick out our stuff, like, they used to color our boxes and I felt like I wasn't, like, really doing nothing in that pod cuz they were doing all the work for us… And I feel like when you guys let us pick our own things, I feel like we liked that and you know, and I just feel like, um, that's a good idea.

The majority of the girls mentioned having a space for “just girls” was “really fun and good because you can express your feelings” (Tina). Maria also thought the all -girls nature of the group created a “safe place to express our feelings and everything …And I think when I'm around girls I could talk more than with boys…Like why would I say my stuff when there's guys? What would they think?”

*Emphasizing Strengths*

Another goal of StrongLinks was to re-focus programming on girls’ strengths, rather than their deficits. This was partly achieved through the creation of a “hope box” as it provided the girls with an opportunity to work on a visual art project that draws on theories from positive youth development. The “hope box” was used as a container to hold positive, encouraging messages in addition to projects made throughout the program. During the interviews, the girls were presented with pictures of their boxes and each explained what their box represented to them. Maria shared,

It actually means something and that's to remind themselves of what we did back in middle school and what we learned….I thought it was fun cuz all the girls were having fun. They love painting, they decorated their own boxes, not like you guys told us to do this, to do that, we got to do whatever we wanted on our boxes, so I thought that was cool…. My friend ask me why you do yellow and black, those are ugly colors and I was like, actually I did yellow and black so you could know the bright side of me and the black of the angriness and the things that are holding me back and stuff.
The girls also commented on the process of creating the “hope box”. Kendra reflected,

When I was doing the hope box, I was thinking about my aunt passing away, because me and my aunt, like, we had this treasure chest that we used to mess around with and we actually decorated it ourselves and we used to put like everything in it… And like, making the hope box kinda brought back memories of her and me together, just making the hope box.

*Mentorship & Speaking Up*

Another component of the program was fostering a mentorship relationship with the girls. Although the girls appeared to experience the co-researchers as “supportive,” “nice,” and “sweet,” one recurring comment about what could be improved was that “you guys need to speak up more.” As Tina put it, “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.” Kendra agreed and suggested, “maybe you guys could have said, ‘oh, we related to it’ and stuff like that” when talking about “what we are going through” and “struggles we talked about.”

Research Question 3:

Girls’ processes of growth and change during the program

Within the relational context of StrongLinks, it was hoped the girls would understand themselves, their stories and their relationships more deeply and positively. Through the program, the girls were empowered to use their strengths and resources within them and through their communities and families, to become experts on their own lives. As StrongLink’s co-researchers, the girls shared how participating in the program impacted the way they think about their relationships, coping and life experiences.

*Coping with stress and anger*
During the program, the girls participated in an art project where they made clay runes. The goal of this activity involved developing a coping skill to manage anxiety and stress. By choosing a symbol that was meaningful to them (e.g., strength, trust, truth), the girls would have a reminder of the strengths and positive qualities they embodied that would help them to deal with stressors in the present and future. Tina spoke to how using her runes would help her deal with stress after the group ended. “If you’re stressed out… you can … do the runes thing, and hold them in your hand to help you think about other stuff and calm down.” Kristin also commented how the runes would help her when she became angry. “You don't have to hit things, like, you can look at this (the runes) and be reminded that you have faith and stuff like that… when I get mad at other people, instead I can use this (the rune). I can touch it instead of yelling and screaming.”

Several of the girls also mentioned that when they got angry, they are able to calm themselves by talking or counting to 10. Before group, Ina stated she “didn't want to tell anybody” about her stress and now “I can let it out.” Synthia also noticed a small shift in her way of coping with anger.

Because before, like, I said, my anger, like, before I would just like, like I said I would just do some things, but now I try to keep my cool, I try to do like the advice that everyone put in. I try to do those things, cuz I don't like drama and all that stuff… Yeah, like they said some, like advice, like I said before, advice. Like, to keep your cool. So like count to ten, say your name and all that stuff. Its like, what, I changed the way I did that.

**Dealing with disconnections**

The girls also talked about how they could approach conflict and disconnection in their relationships. Kristin stated, “instead of (physical) fighting you can sit down and talk about it.” Mabelle reflected that her approach to talking about things that are bothering her in relationships has shifted.
Sometimes when I have a problem with somebody, I say it to them but not in a way that starts fights...I will defend myself. I’m not a scardy cat type, I just don't like starting trouble. So, I tell my father more things about my step-mother and my sisters...and I tell my friends like what annoys me about them but not in a way that pisses them off because they are my friends and I don't want to hurt their feelings.

Kendra also shared what she learned “relationship-wise, and friendship-wise,” including

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

Maria also commented on how two of the girls in the group (who were not getting along before the group started) were able to re-connect through “working together.”

I liked that the girls worked together- they, like, try to get each other out and we were working pretty fine. Like I know, I'm not saying names, but 2 of the girls didn't get along, and now I see them in the hallways like having laughs with each other.

Synthia also stated, “Like I said if it (knots/ conflict) happens to me, then I know what to do.

Like I have choices, I have options. Like I can do one thing and I can do another.” She now has alternative ways to approach and cope with “knots” that she learned through the girls’ shared experiences and brainstorming.

Our lived experiences

In terms of relationships within the group, the girls got to know each other in different ways and learned “what’s important” to each other and “actually saw what [they] were going through.” Maria talked about this by stating,

What I learned is about the other girls that I never knew that was important to them. Like I knew about important things but I never knew that was important to them. Like my friend Mabelle, she put that what was important to her was food, friends, family and something else. I didn't know that was so important to her. So now I got to know what was most important to them. So I learned those things and what’s important for me and
why was it important for me. Why did I chose those things? That's what I learned. So now we know each other, like we talk about it in the hallways. Now we all know what is important to us, what is mostly important to us.

Kendra spoke to the way her friendships with the girls deepened by getting to know
“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.” Ina
also felt touched when another group member “really opened up” and this sharing allowed her to
“see the other side of her.” Through getting to know the girls in a different lens, Mabelle came
to realize she shouldn’t be “so judgmental” because “there could be a girl that is really sweet but it looks like she's all that, but if I were to get to know her she would actually be ok.”

Connections and understandings made through relationship

By learning “to trust” in the group space, the girls became more open and able consider other perspectives, to “look at relationships from different angles,” “understand where people come from” and ultimately, developed new understandings about their relationships. There existed a powerful exchange when the girls talked about what they thought about their relationships in an honest way. As Kendra stated, “it was good to say it…even if I’d thought it, to actually say it out loud, it made more sense to me.” This atmosphere allowed the girls to be “more open-minded,” “get more open” and “express myself more.” Tina “felt happy because there are people who I trust now, in the group, that I didn’t know before.”

Ultimately, Adrie spoke to the impact of the group experience by stating, “I didn't change the way I act, but the way feel…like I am better than most people think I am.” Ina also voiced her perspective on the impact of the group on her vision for herself by stating, “like I think I'm thinking more about life and future...so what really matters in your life.”

Reflections of Co-researcher
StrongLinks represented a bi-directional learning process whereupon the co-researchers (including the girls) were stakeholders in the development of the program. Throughout the process, this researcher made “links” and insights of growth about herself, the co-researchers and the process of research itself. This study represented a process of coming to know multiple perspectives- both for the girls and for this researcher. In this way, StrongLinks provided a parallel opportunity for this researcher’s growth through the relationships within StrongLinks and coming to know one’s own voice.

From the inception of StrongLinks, the young co-researchers came to group with an eagerness to see what the program was all about. On the first day of the program, the girls were hesitant to enter the classroom and appeared to be “testing” the co-researchers to see what this group would really be about. Would this group be like school? Would they be told how to act and behave? Would it be fun or boring? When they discovered that they had the choice and ability to navigate and create the group’s curriculum as co-researchers, the girls became excited to claim the space as their own. By the second week of group, the girls’ collective enthusiasm was evident and their respect towards the co-researchers and each other grew. This researcher believes this positive energy was developed through the ownership of the program and in determining its content and process. During the group, many of the girls spoke to the impact of choosing the activities and discussions they participated in and how this choice gave them an increased sense of capability and meaning.

The topic of this dissertation was initially motivated by this co-researcher’s belief and curiosity in the power of relationships and connectedness. For her, discovering and making meaning of connections and disconnections have been continual processes of self-reflection and change. During her own adolescence, relationships with other girls were often a source of stress,
confusion and distrust and it took the majority of her teenage years for authentic and mutual relationships with other young women to evolve. Therefore, witnessing the girls of StrongLinks relate to one another in a more honest, frank manner was surprising and quite different from this co-researcher’s own experience of middle school friendships. Further, the girls’ ability to “put it out there” and speak about conflict, pain and sadness was remarkable and representative of their character strengths. Even more so, though, was their ability to validate one another, express empathy and “be there” for each other. In contrast to much of the literature that stated girls in adolescence “lose” their voice, these girls spoke bravely about the realities of their lives and shared their feelings with honesty. In this way, a space was formed where the girls’ points of views, narratives and strengths were shared and a program that paralleled their needs and wants was created.

Another of the interesting aspects of creating StrongLinks was the relationship formed between the three co-researchers. Truly, writing a dissertation independently is difficult in itself; adding two other people’s thoughts, opinions and strategies while balancing differing priorities and life experiences through the 4-year collaboration became very challenging. Within this time period, the relationships between the co-researchers experienced intense moments of connection and disconnection, excitement and disappointment, and collaboration and conflict. Through this experience, this researcher tried to be open to understanding others’ perspectives and choices. Ultimately, this researcher learned about navigating dual professional/personal relationships and how to stay true to her values, goals and integrity.

Finally, the choice to utilize a mixed methodology was reflective of this researcher’s desire to balance alternative, relational ways of knowing with more traditionally generated (quantitative) information. Although much of her previous research experience was with
quantitative methodology, this researcher realized that qualitative data would encompass the personal experiences of all involved where the “data” would be knowledge with and among the co-researchers, not simply “about” the co-researchers. In this way, the data would be nuanced and colored with the co-researchers’ opinions, beliefs and experiences. This was the launching point from which StrongLinks came to be.
CHAPTER V

This chapter will summarize and discuss the findings of the StrongLinks program. It will include the study’s strengths and limitations as well as implications for future programming and policy.

Summary of findings

This mixed-methods study explored the relationships and social connections of urban middle school girls who participated in a strength-based, participatory action program. The quantitative results did not indicate the girls’ participation in the 6-week StrongLinks curriculum increased levels of relational health or perceived mutuality in their relationships as measured by the RHI and MPDQ. The qualitative portion of the data, however, indicated other meaningful aspects of relational growth, knowledge and awareness. That is, through the semi-structured interviews, group sessions, and expressive activities, the girls voiced many important aspects of their lives.

Themes that surfaced included the multiple ways they spoke about and understood themselves and their relationships. They described aspects of relationships that were both growth-fostering as well as “knotty.” They talked of both connections and disconnections, and how each was experienced and felt. Finally, the girls brainstormed ways to work through them. The girls’ also appeared to have experienced StrongLinks as a trusting place where it was important to be “just girls.” They voiced the impact of expressive avenues as a vital way to use their voices. They spoke to the positive effect and empowerment of being co-researchers in navigating StrongLink’s directions. Finally, the girls’ described processes of growth and change during the program, particularly around coping with stress and anger and dealing with disconnections. Ultimately, they thought about and reflected on their relationships as well as
created new understandings and connections through the sharing of their individual lived experiences.

Discussion of findings

Theoretical Implications

As detailed in earlier chapters, aspects of StrongLinks were conceptualized using components of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT; Miller, 1976). RCT was developed based on the relational experiences of women (Jordan, 1991; Miller, 1991) and applications of the theory have typically relied on samples of Caucasian college-aged and adult women (Neff & Harter, 2002; Sormanti & Kayser, 2000; Sperberg & Stabb, 1998; Tantillo & Sanftner, 2003). Presently, RCT is increasingly being applied to the prevention and treatment of other populations (Belgrave, Reed, Plybon, Butler, et al., 2004; Belgrave, Reed, Plybon, & Corneille, 2004; P. Birrell & J. J. Freyd, 2006; Burke, Keaton, & Pennell, 2003; Calhoun, Bartolomucci, & McLean, 2005; Covington, Burke, Keaton, & Norcott, 2008; Foley, 2001; Irvine, 2005; E. Sparks, 2004), including ethnic adolescent girls.

For the girls in StrongLinks, the group was a place for them to explore and reflect on the meaning of connections and disconnections; the girls voiced that meaningful relationships were “a process” that helped to define them. The group connectedness, sense of belonging and expressive activities seemed to become a vehicle through which the girls were able to address various issues in their lives. By working with each other, the girls came together to develop a sense of ownership and pride, and consider new ways of thinking and problem-solving.

RCT posits that people grow through and toward relationships, such as through relational skills and awareness of self and others; in this way, relationships can be empowering (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). However, urban girls are often met with negative and aversive realities (violence
and other trauma) and environments (home, school, society) that do not easily foster authentic connections and the development of relational abilities (Miller, 1976). StrongLinks was developed to provide a relational context to foster girls’ growth through building and working through interpersonal issues, addressing problematic issues together (Butler & Wintram, 1991), relating to one another, and sharing themselves in relationships (Pipher, 1994).

Another component of RCT is the emphasis on mutual interchanges (Genero, 1992). This mutuality in relationships serves to increase one’s sense of connectedness to another, capability to take action, knowledge of self and the other, sense of self-worth and validation, and connection with others beyond the immediate interaction (Miller, 1988). This building of respect, openness and trust in the relationships within the group (with each other and with co-researchers) was critical, but also hard as many of the girls expressed difficulty trusting.

Literature indicates that adolescents who experience invalidation and chronic stress (as experienced through traumatic events) often withdraw and disconnect from relationships as a survival strategy (Banks, 2001; Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Consequently, causing the opposite of RCT’s five good things to be experienced, including depression, numbing, immobilization, inauthenticity, inability to produce or create, fear of reaching out, low self-worth and confusion about one’s own experience and experience of others (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). They espouse, “all of this makes sense if we think of an individual trying to survive in a dangerous world, trying to keep some inner true experience alive in the face of massive invalidation and infringement on vulnerability” (p. 69). It has been found that a relational model of healing in the context of healthy relationships can be effective for girls who have experienced such trauma (Banks, 2006; Birrell & Freyd, 2006).
Despite this, several of the girls spoke to the growing presence of mutuality in the group by commenting on how other girls were opening up and speaking about “what’s important” in their lives and this appeared to encourage them to share their own histories. In this way, hearing each other’s stories seemed to be experienced as a validating and honest source of connectedness that felt safe. In addition, the girls clearly spoke to the impact of mutuality within relationships; thus, of being open with one another and “being there” for each other (both emotionally and physically). Additionally, this ability to assert themselves authentically and create mutual interchanges appeared easier within certain relational domains, namely, in their friendships with other girls. This was supported by their responses on the MPDQ and indicated the girls experienced mutuality in their relationships with peers “most of the time.” Comparable levels of mutuality were found in a sample of adolescents girls in foster care (Kappus, 2008) and female college students (Evans, 2002; Kruger, 2006; Wechsler, 2005). This mutuality with their peers may be explained by Way and Green’s (2006) theory that ethnic adolescents may compensate for the lack of support with family members by turning to friends for support. In addition, adolescence is a time when peer relationships assume an increasing amount of importance and potentially assist with positive development, belonging and a sense of well-being (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

Although the girls communicated that this “give and take” in relationships helped to maintain and grow connectedness, they also spoke to how in certain relationships (with parents) navigating this was difficult and even unrealistic. Thus, the girls learned that not all relationships are equal; they were able to discern which relationships were mutual and which were not. They also demonstrated the ability to negotiate the mutuality in relationships in the service of benefiting future relationships. For example, the girls communicated a desire for the
mentors (co-researchers) to be more forthcoming with their own life narratives and struggles. In hindsight, had the mentors been more open, an opportunity for a more mutual interchange may have been possible and further facilitated the effectiveness of the group’s relational impact.

The girls also spoke to the importance of being real with one another, feeling understood and energized through their relationships. This is supported by the results on the RHI that showed the girls “often to always” experienced empowerment/zest, empathy and authenticity in their peer relationships, “sometimes to always” in relationships with mentors and “sometimes to seldom” within their communities. The fact that the girls felt most connected to their peer group supports the significance and protective nature of peer relationships. It is important to note that the lowest level of growth-fostering connection existed within the community subgroup. This may be due to the ethos of their urban communities where violence and poverty create an environment where these relational aspects are compromised. Liang (2002) also noted that growth-fostering community relationships are more likely to be associated with a decrease in stress and depression; for the girls, their communities may not be a source of growth-fostering relationships.

The girls also shared about the impact of having a caring, consistent adult or “othermother” in their lives as many of their parents were not able to spend time with them because of restrictive and demanding work schedules. For some of the girls, this was found through an older sister, aunt or other woman in their life. On the RHI, this was supported by the girls’ moderate level of relational quality with mentors. Resilience theory posits that these caregivers and the solid foundation of their relationship may greatly contribute to urban girls’ abilities to thrive against the multiple, intersecting adversities they face (Lopez & Lechuga, 2007). These relationships may represent a key protective factor and opportunity to talk about
what matters in their lives. Further, these relational opportunities serve as ways to increase the girls’ capacity to find strength and resilience within themselves.

According to RCT, resiliency is defined as the movement towards mutually empowering relationships in the face of adversities, trauma and sociocultural stereotypes and pressures (Jordan, 2004). That is, during StrongLinks, the girls expressed themselves authentically, trusted one another, contextualized the sources of their disconnections and problem-solved around them. For example, several of the girls spoke to often experiencing frustration and anger in relationships and problem-solved new ways to cope with these feelings and assert themselves in different ways. It is also proposed that by staying connected and attuned to their voices and authentic feelings, the girls were able to solidify their own sense of value, power, and capacity to face the challenges and realities in their lives. This process of connecting to each other in the group is a crucial aspect of psychosocial development (Pipher, 2002).

_A Feminist Ecological Focus & Multiple Identities_

Threaded throughout this curriculum was a feminist focus on the girls’ voices and lived experiences. For StrongLinks, this meant efforts to incorporate the girls’ multiple perspectives and identities, acknowledging how their environment, relationships, family, and culture shaped their worlds and experiences. This process was informed through the feminist ecological model (Ballou, Matsumoto, & Wagner, 2002) whereupon the girls’ voices were contextualized through the varying cultural, societal and political systems in which they were embedded.

Although an awareness of the different forms of unearned advantage and power is an essential part of the feminist ecological model and relational connection, the girls rarely discussed their identities related to race, ethnicity, class, or culture during StrongLinks. During the group sessions, it appeared that the significance of culture and poverty were not in the
forefront of the girls’ minds. This could be due to several reasons, including that urban girls often do not seek each other out to address the inequities in their lives and communities (Pastor, 2007). And although they may have had a subjective understanding and a critical consciousness of the role inequalities played in their lives, they did not share it in the group context. Perhaps this was because they did not perceive a sense of difference among them. Considering that the majority of the girls (10/11) represented a non-dominant status group, the experience of “sameness” may have been emphasized more than “difference.” That is, the urban ethos the girls were growing up in may have represented a commonality and equal status among them.

Another reason could have been that the girls, as adolescents, were not yet developmentally mature to have this critical dialogue. Or perhaps because, as Pastor and colleagues (2007) assert, girls’ critical consciousness manifests itself in individual behaviors and styles, not collectively constructed ones. It may also have been that they did not feel comfortable, given the three co-researchers represented dominant status groups (Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class, highly educated women who, because of these identities, carried privilege). This could have raised the possibility of sociocultural-related disconnection. Another consideration was that the group may have been too short and therefore there was not ample time to explore this in a way that felt comfortable and safe (to be further discussed in the limitations sections).

The Issue of Voice in the Girls’ Relationships

While research indicates that Caucasian, middle-class girls (Gilligan, 1991) become silenced by societal messages to avoid conflict and difference during adolescence (as speaking honestly might endanger the relationship), other researchers found that girls of color and low-income backgrounds were not silenced in this way (Way, 1995a). Rather, they used their voices to speak their minds, express opinions, dare to disagree and speak the truth in their relationships.
Supporting this, Crothers and colleagues (2005) found girls of color were more likely to identify with traditional masculine characteristics and report using relational aggression significantly less often than did their white peers. Moreover, Taylor and colleagues (1995) also suggested that adolescent girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more willing to engage in overtly aggressive behavior. Further, Theran’s (2003) study of testing Gilligan’s notion of loss of voice in a sample of 108 ethnically diverse, low socioeconomic adolescent girls revealed that the theory did not apply to them either. Rather, she argued that ethnic, disadvantaged girls are socialized to be more outspoken and internalize masculine traits with peers.

The girls of StrongLinks similarly used their voices and spoke out about anger, distrust, and hurt as well as friendship, love and loyalty. The girls’ “speaking out” can be viewed as a survival strategy and protective factor to assert themselves in the face of the diversity of experiences, contexts, challenges and opportunities that they face (Pastor, 2007). However, it can also lead to maladaptive behaviors as (T. L. Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994) proposed. They reported Afrocentric socialization strategies assist an “individual’s ability to avoid internalizing negative societal messages” which can “foster unhealthy self-images and self-depreciatory behaviors” (p. 327). Such practices may then translate into adolescent girls’ assertive or direct approaches when problem solving with their peers. An example of this “quick fix” mindset (Robinson & Ward, 1991) was the girl-fighting discussed during StrongLinks. In line with Rivera’s (1999) notion of dialectic resistance, the girls’ experience of girl-fighting was both a way for them to protect their dignity (liberating), but also led to more problems (oppressive).

There is also evidence that adolescents may use their voice in different ways in parental versus peer relationships based on their relational self-worth (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, &
Kastelic, 1998). That is, an individual’s sense of self-worth may differ based on relational context (such as with parents, peers, teachers). In this way, the girls may experience the ability to be assertive in one relational context, but not in others. This could be viewed as an example of Rogers’ (1995/6) “double subjectivity” whereupon there exist two contradictory voices or perspectives that the girls experience.

Finally, the concept of voice can be viewed and defined as a multilevel construct, similar to the construct of empowerment proposed by Schulz and colleagues (1995). Within this framework, a continuum from individual to community levels is incorporated. Thus, voice at the individual level is one that encompasses the ability to express one’s individual thoughts, opinions and feelings and assert one’s perspective. At this level, self-efficacy and coping skills are demonstrated (Pearrow, 2008) and one’s voice develops through the abilities of self-disclosure and sharing with others (as a group) to also include an ability to critically reflect in one’s reality, and share similar goals and experiences. Voice at the community level includes the assertion of one’s voice and reality through social action in one’s community; to be validated and acknowledged by external, structural and societal systems. In order to foster this level of voice, actions to help the girls resist messages of the dominant society/media and learn to critically think about their lives is important. This helps to create a collective sense of well-being, strengthen networks to improve quality of community life and provide mutual support to effect change (Pearrow, 2008). The authors also assert that changes at one level can be linked to changes at another level (Schulz, et al., 1995). Within StrongLinks, the girls’ voices were fostered on this individual level of self-expression, as the girls shared openly about their individual lived experiences. However, the other, more structural levels of voice (community) were not explored (to be discussed in the limitations section).
Significance of StrongLinks

A vital component of the StrongLinks program was the use of artistic activities to facilitate emotional expression and connection. Group programming has effectively utilized art-based techniques to facilitate self-expression in urban adolescents, including photography, writing, clay, drama, among others. (Byrne, 2007; de Finney, 2007; Roa, et al., 2007; Wong, 2008). In addition, Felshin (1995) suggests that art can be transformative as “activist art” which allows for the engagement of participants in acts of self-expression as a way of promoting voice; in this way, she argues art can be a feminist act to make the personal political. For StrongLinks, the art-based projects allowed the girls to engage with one another in dialogue. In evaluating the program, the girls reported the art activities helped to make them feel comfortable sharing important issues with one another. It also allowed them to participate in fun and relaxing activities that helped them cope with stress. In this way, the art-based aspect of StrongLinks served as a medium for self-exploration and emotional expression. Thus, it appeared that the process of creating art was a means for using their voices, creating a trusting and open group context and challenging traditional ways of knowing.

Following the girls’ needs and wants in the process of StrongLinks also played a critical role in fostering the girls’ ownership, construction of meaning and investment in the program. Thus, the PAR framework called for an emphasis on the girls’ lived experiences and a co-researcher model of research (Lind, 2005). When interviewing the girls about their responsibility in the decision-making about how the group should be run, they overwhelmingly expressed while this was a surprising and unexpected part of the group, it was one that was fundamental to StrongLink’s relevance to their lives. PAR was also strengthened through a partnering process that was capacity building and focused on the girls’ strengths and resources.
This helped the girls to develop new competencies in dealing with the issues in their lives, such as anger management. Consistent with the literature, this egalitarian, strength-based approach in having their opinions and input on the process led to a feeling of empowerment, pride and value (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Horsch, Little, Smith, Goodyear, & Harris, 2002).

Moreover, PAR research aims to move beyond critical consciousness to mobilization of social change and action. However, within the context of the group, concrete social action was not achieved due to time constraints (to be addressed in limitations). What was achieved, however, was the creation of a group where the girls were mutually respected and enabled to make decisions; ultimately, their feedback and collaboration furthered the development of StrongLinks. One could argue that the girls did contribute to a social project in the sense that StrongLinks will be implemented with other girls (and will continuously evolve as the girls do). In conclusion, the PAR model provided the girls a group experience that emphasized their sense of agency and capability and had a positive influence on their growing sense of selves and the future of other girls in similar situations.

Finally, the girls’ evaluation of StrongLinks spoke to the need and significance of “girls only” programming; namely, girls’ needs are different than boys’ needs. Therefore, by providing an opportunity for single-sex programming, the girls were more willing to explore developmental and relationship issues unique to adolescent girls, such as sexual activity and romantic relationships. By adopting a girl-centered approach, their strengths and potential for self-exploration, leadership and “speaking up” became possible. As Molly Mead and colleagues (2005) describe, “gender-sensitive programs are those that not only pay attention to the
multifaceted identities of participating girls, but also consider the unique developmental needs and strengths of girls as integral to program design and practice” (p. 9).

Further, the mentoring component of StrongLinks attempted to facilitate and model a supportive relationship formed on mutual trust and respect. This mentoring relationship also calls for the adult to be mindful and aware of differences due to culture and other points of privilege. Time, trust and uncomfortable dialogue need to occur in order for these differences to be addressed for authentic, mutual connections to be established. Sullivan (1997) articulately described the intersection of mentorship and culture by stating,

the character of meaningful relationships… are distinguished by girls’ ability to speak freely; by women’s ability to listen to, understand and validate girls’ feelings and experience; and by women’s willingness to share their own experience. The focus of this relationship is on confirming or drawing out girls’ experience, feeling or knowledge (p. 170).

During StrongLinks, the girls were able to speak freely and the co-researchers actively listened and witnessed their voices. However, as previously mentioned, the girls voiced that while they appreciated the one-on-one connection with their mentors (through the journaling and interviews), they expressed a desire for the mentors to be more forthcoming with their own life experiences. Thus, the girls called for what Sullivan (1997) describes as an “evocative relationship,” in which mentorship becomes mutual, constant and in connection, rather than unidirectional and transitional. From this co-researcher’s perspective, balancing the facilitating role inherent in the structure of group discussions with a more open, involved and disclosing stance was a challenge. As is common in qualitative and PAR research, the involvement and reflection of the self is inherent in this process (Lind, 2005; Weis & Fine, 2001). Going forward, the girls’ feedback on their mentorship experience will shape and broaden this researcher’s skill base and professional growth as a group facilitator.
Finally, the girls expressed how their participation in the group impacted their relationships with each other. It appeared that the group dialogue provided them the opportunity to connect in a different way than before the group. Maria spoke to this when commenting how two of the girls working through their conflict to become better friends during the process of the group. Others talked about how the group helped them to communicate more effectively in their relationships. It is hoped that this internalized experience of connection and mutuality will strengthen their future relationships so that they are more likely to be empowering and growth-fostering.

Limitations

The findings of StrongLinks need to be interpreted in the context of both its strengths and weaknesses. Although this study had several strengths including an ethnically diverse group of girls, its PAR design and strength-based curriculum, there were also several limitations. For example, practical constraints common in school-based research, such as time and resources, impacted the group experience. Originally, the group was scheduled to meet once weekly for 9 weeks after school for a two hour period. This plan was revised when the after-school bus was cancelled due to lack of funding; instead, the group was held during the school day and therefore, met for the duration of one academic period (approximately 50 minutes) rather than the expected two hours. The group also ran during the last quarter of the year (April-June), so factors related to the end of the year also affected the program (8th grade graduation, final exams, school vacation and school trips).

This difference in duration, time of year and length of group potentially impacted the dynamics and norms of the program. This researcher believes that the collective safety and energy of the group was forming just as the group was about to end. Thus, it felt as if the group
had just begun discussing important issues within the context of a safe space. Similarly, the brief nature of StrongLinks could have also influenced the lack of significant effect the group experience had on the girls’ perceived mutuality or relational health, as measured by the MPDQ and RHI. Further, the group was not able to involve community or family members as planned for this reason. Another unfortunate limitation was the weekly tardiness (and absence from group) of one of the co-researchers due to scheduling conflicts. This also could have impacted the dynamic and safety of the group and shared sense of responsibility among the facilitators.

Although the PAR framework allowed the girls autonomy to choose the directions of each group session, it was a delicate balance for this researcher to not impose the “planned” agenda on the girls. For example, the girls did not appear to want to talk about culture; yet the literature shows that this is a critical part of a group experience for urban girls (Bessette, 2003; Pahl & Way, 2006). Conversations on race and ethnicity were not topics discussed. The present finding would have been strengthened by encouraging and integrating girls’ understanding and awareness of their ethnic identities as well as by incorporating a more diverse group of facilitators.

Moreover, the curriculum originally planned to address and encourage social action through a community-based service project in efforts to build a more responsive school-community partnership. Unfortunately, this section of the curriculum was not accomplished because of time constraints. However, the next iteration of the curriculum (see Appendix D) incorporates this important aspect of empowerment. In addition, considering that external factors such as structural influences and societal systems and values can represent sources of “power over” for groups of non-dominant status, this project would have been strengthened by including an analysis at the sociopolitical level. This need becomes evident when considering the
girls’ report of low levels of relational support within their community. With more time and facilitators with more diverse backgrounds this need could more easily addressed.

Another limitation includes the concept of voice discussed earlier. Through StrongLinks, the girls were able to express themselves openly and honestly, representing the first step for them to gain a fuller sense of their voice and capability. However, the next step would be to help them realize the existing hierarchies in voice and societal structures through critical dialogue. This dialogue would foster awareness and understanding of negative messages and stereotypes they may receive as well as a deeper understanding of the larger, political and social environment in which they live. This process would involve social action through advocacy groups, and coalition building that impact the sociopolitical process (Pearrow, 2008) and integrate community and individual levels of voice and empowerment.

Lastly, although a diversity of cultures was represented, the girls of StrongLinks are not representative of all urban adolescent girls. The sample size was small and limited to a particular geographic region. Further, the selection process resulted in many of the girls coming from the same homeroom who were also participating in the RALLY program (and thus had pre-existing relationships which also could have influenced the process of the group). Considering this, StrongLinks does not attempt to make broad statements, assumptions or generalizations about this population. Rather, it is reporting on the unique experience of this particular constellation of girls who participated in the program.

Implications for future practice

This study suggests several directions for future research and practice on girls’ programming and development.

*Include girls (and women) in development of programs*
It is recommended that future research adopt similar feminist, PAR approaches in developing girls’ programs, including a comprehensive needs assessment. By including girls in all phases of program development, girls become empowered with a sense of control, ownership and leadership. This will allow for apprenticeship where the girls are building and influencing the programs that will support them. Further, the inclusion of female co-researchers/ facilitators can create a possibility for mentorship and connection for the girls with supportive adults. Awareness of the importance of mutual exchange within group sessions has been shown to be particularly powerful in establishing trusting mentoring relationships, deconstructing power hierarchies (Sullivan, 1999) and establishing relationships of safety (Roa, Irvine, & Cervantez, 2007).

Foci of girls’ programming

This study also points to the salience of gender-sensitive programs focused on relationships, stress and expressive arts among urban adolescent girls. Future programs should consider using art as an avenue for girls’ to express themselves more openly and non- directly. Discussing connections and disconnections within their relationships could also provide a context for the girls to think about the presence and potential of their relationships to nurture and support them. Additionally, these conversations should include a focus on problem solving and strategizing to facilitate new ways of coping and handling difficult issues in their lives.

Integrate girls’ ethnic identity formation

Research has demonstrated the development of ethnic identity influences girls’ psychological development, academic achievement and ability to cope with discrimination and racism (Umana-Taylor, et al., 2006; Umana-Taylor, et al., 2006). These findings suggest programming should be implemented with adolescent girls from diverse cultural and
socioeconomic backgrounds that integrate explorations of race, ethnicity and culture in order to understand the experiences of these girls. Another potential area of research is a focus on girls from rural areas as their experiences may differ from those of urban girls. These programs would add a complexity and fullness to the understanding of adolescent girls and allow mental health professionals to recognize the multiple and complex experiences and strengths of these girls.

*Longer-term and replicated programs*

Subsequent girl-centered programs should be designed to include a longer duration than this cohort of StrongLinks. This researcher suggests a length of at least 9-12 weeks whereupon safety, trust and group norms can be established and a fuller, less rushed curriculum can be experienced. For example, this time frame would allow for potential family and community involvement as well as participation in a service project which, collectively, would potentially contribute to a more responsive community-school relationship. It may also allow for a significant increase in perceived mutuality and relational health as measured by the MPDQ and RHI. As is common in intervention-based research, replication of the study to validate results should also be considered. Of note, in efforts to determine its effectiveness and salience, StrongLinks is presently being implemented in a cohort of 6 girls and it is hoped that the program will continue to evolve in this way.

*Bridging policy and practice*

It is also critical to acknowledge the overlapping disciplines of practice and policy. Therefore, at the level of policy and funding, it is important to establish outcomes to advocate for adequate funding. Programs, such as Girls Circle, have built curriculums based on their research and by providing measurable results, are able to justify their need for funding (Roa, Irvine, &
Cervantez, 2007). Upcoming studies should explore the possibility of balancing PAR research with gaining outcomes to determine if these are compatible methodologies.

Other programs have also utilized a partnership approach, whereupon they seek out funding through organizations or agencies that share their philosophy and mission to develop and sustain programs for adolescent girls. Another way to effect policy is to get the word out; some researchers may choose to do this through publishing and disseminating scholarly knowledge gained from these programs. Others may choose to position themselves as advocates and join existing community-based movements (Nygreen, 2006) or use their research to influence policy or legislation (Fine et al., 2000; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). These efforts will propel the goal of better serving urban girls by providing mental health professionals the opportunity to gather information, have discussions, and build off of previous interventions.

While there exist a handful of programs designed for girls of specific ethnic groups whereupon knowledge of cultural roots, racial identity and development are the foci, there are not enough programs to service the multitude of girls in need. In-depth diversity training for group facilitators would help women to co-lead groups that address the many experiences of girls from varying cultural, economic and social backgrounds in a sensitive, respectful and open manner.

Advocating for restructuring within educational systems in urban settings is also an important avenue to explore. Given that this study found expressive techniques and relational support to be potential ways for girls to express themselves, creating “community living rooms” (Lopez & Lechuga, 2007) would provide spaces for building positive relationships, utilizing their strengths, and developing coping skills and strategies of resistance. By shifting the focus of
education from purely academic achievement to include social-emotional growth, a more protective and nurturing learning environment could be experienced.

Such training, funding and advocacy efforts would make possible the subsequent development of programs aimed at serving girls growing up in urban environments and address contextually relevant issues such as youth and community violence, urban ecology, reducing risk behaviors and increasing protective factors. Ultimately, these programs would promote positive development in the girls we serve through their unique methodologies, resources and needs assessments.

Conclusion

The present study adds to the body of research indicating the importance of girls programming that is PAR, feminist and strength-based in design. StrongLinks aimed to expand and evaluate the gap between existing research on urban girls and their actual experiences. As the true stakeholders of the program, the girls were asked to share their personal narratives, opinions and perspectives to contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of the program and inform the researchers of what was relevant and effective in their learning and growth. This process became a journey that began with assessing the girls’ needs and culminated with the development of a program to address them. Along this journey, growth, validation and new learning was enabled within an egalitarian context of staying focused on the girls’ voices and perspectives.

StrongLinks speaks to the importance of listening to girls’ voices, meaning-making, realities and truths and providing them a space to connect with one another while contributing to programming that may benefit other girls their age. The benefits of the program resulted from their dialogue, and problem-solving strategies. They also included the girls’ increased
awareness, understanding and sources of relational support and coping skills through artistic modes of self-expression. Taken together, these benefits ultimately contribute to a better understanding of how future programming and school-based interventions can be effective and salient to urban adolescent girls.

StrongLinks contributed to a deeper knowledge and existing literature on urban, ethnic girls and the application of relational cultural theory and participatory action research. Groups inclusive of a relational perspective can help to foster girls’ relational skills and highlight how girls’ relationships with female peers can be a protective factor in their lives. Through the process of listening, empathizing, validating and mutually engaging in StrongLinks, the girls were able to reflect on and share information about their lives in a relationally honest way to reach new ways of understanding and getting to know each other.

The present research findings demonstrate how girl-centered, strength-based and feminist methodologies can offer a “body of research” that is reflective of a group of urban girls’ experiences and relationships. By developing programs with girls to support and empower them, their voices can become more prominent and understood in policy, research, and practice. Truly, each of these 11 girls represents a “strong link” in bringing forth their truths and realities to the field of psychology.
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### Appendix A. Table 1.

#### Girls’ Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Title</th>
<th>Population and Demographics</th>
<th>Type of program</th>
<th>Foci</th>
<th>Contact information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girlz II Women</td>
<td>Urban middle school girls who are interested in participating. This is not a group that is specifically for girls with an identifiable diagnosis.</td>
<td>This is a prevention program for any girls who are interested in connecting with their peers. Uses a participatory action research design to make changes to program design.</td>
<td>Helping girls to strengthen voice and self-esteem through the use of a variety of activities including family nights, ropes courses, field trips, and lessons on the media.</td>
<td>Adina Davidson at 617-628-8815. (Unknown, 2004)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teen Voices</td>
<td>Girls from all over the country who are between the ages of 13 and 19. This is for any girl who wants to express themselves.</td>
<td>This is a social activism program that is designed to allow girls a forum for expressing their opinions in a public space.</td>
<td>This is an online magazine that publishes written work from girls who want to speak up and out about issues that many girls face. They focus on social issues that impact girls including, but not limited to, media, sexual assault, and depression.</td>
<td>Teen Voices Online P.O. Box 120027 Boston, MA 02112-0027 (Unknown, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of Ourselves</td>
<td>Sixth, seventh and eighth grade girls first participate in the program and then serve as mentors for fourth and fifth grade girls.</td>
<td>This is a primary prevention and educational program that works with girls on maintaining a healthy body image. Girls do not need to have disordered eating to participate.</td>
<td>This program explores a number of topics including healthy eating, positive qualities in the self, relaxation techniques, mindfulness as related to the body, and healthy body image.</td>
<td>Full of Ourselves McLean Hospital 115 Mill Street Belmont, MA 02478 (Steiner-Adair &amp; Sjostrom, 2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owning Up</td>
<td>This curriculum serves middle and high school level boys and girls.</td>
<td>This is a 15 class curriculum that is designed to be taught in school by the school’s educators.</td>
<td>The focus of this curriculum is to address violence, bullying, relational aggression and power differentials.</td>
<td>Rosalind Wiseman P.O. Box 11263 Washington, DC 20008-9998 (Wiseman, 2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls Expressive Therapy Group –</td>
<td>This group serves girls ages 7-10 from all backgrounds.</td>
<td>This is an outpatient psychiatric group.</td>
<td>“Art, dance, movement, play and theater are used to help girls develop</td>
<td>Department of Psychiatry; Children's Hospital Boston Fegan 8; 300 Longwood Avenue</td>
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<td><strong>Children’s Hospital Boston</strong></td>
<td>their abilities to express emotions in healthy ways and to improve self-esteem.&quot; (Botta, 2007)</td>
<td>Boston, MA 02115</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Decision Arts – Whittier Street Health Center</strong></td>
<td>This is a group designed for urban, at-risk females between the ages of 12 and 18.</td>
<td>Arts Therapy Department Whittier Street Health Center 1125 Tremont Street Roxbury, MA 02120 Tel: (617) 427-1000 Fax: (617) 989-3247</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relational Practice Groups</strong></td>
<td>This is an experiential/educational program.</td>
<td>Wellesley Center for Women Wellesley College 106 Central Street Wellesley, MA 02481-8203 USA 781-283-2500 <a href="mailto:WCW@wellesley.edu">WCW@wellesley.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GirlsQuest</strong></td>
<td>This is a mentoring program providing teenage girls with year-round support networks during the challenging teenage years</td>
<td>Girls Quest 150 West 30th Street, Suite 901 New York, NY 10001 Telephone: 212-532-7050 Fax: 212-532-7061</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Girls Today Women Tomorrow</strong></td>
<td>Through GTWT, young ladies redefine what it is to be an effective leader of self through commitment</td>
<td>Girls Today Women Tomorrow Leadership Mentoring Program 1505 East First Street Los Angeles, CA 90033 323.526.3039 323.263.3117 fax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Journey Toward Womanhood</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls of African descent ages 12-17.</td>
<td>Sisterhood Agenda, 524 Ridge Street, Newark, NJ 07104, (973) 230-2765</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>This program is designed for girls of African descent ages 12-17.</td>
<td>This is a 13-week intensive and comprehensive program developed by “Sisterhood Agenda”.</td>
<td>Rooted in the African &quot;rites of passage&quot; tradition of young women gathering in groups to receive guidance from older women, A Journey Toward Womanhood is a program with a modern approach to instilling knowledge of cultural roots and community awareness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Best Friends</td>
<td>This program is designed for sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade girls who are at risk for unwanted pregnancies and HIV infection</td>
<td>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF), P.O. Box 2316, Princeton, NJ 08543, (877) 843-RWJF</td>
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<tr>
<td>This program is designed for sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade girls who are at risk for unwanted pregnancies and HIV infection</td>
<td>This is a program operated through the Newark school system and were organized by Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes the health and well-being of youth.</td>
<td>This program offers a range of classroom sessions, weekly mentoring meetings, structured activities designed to foster self-esteem, supportive relationships, and positive peer pressure as well as information about sexuality and substance abuse, and career and recreational opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>GoGirlGo! Boston</td>
<td>This is a program for girls in Boston.</td>
<td>GoGirlGo! Boston, Simmons College Athletic Department, 300 The Fenway, Boston MA 02115, 617.521.1039, fax 617.521.1091</td>
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<tr>
<td>This is a program for girls in Boston.</td>
<td>This is a program developed by the Women’s Sports Foundation to improve the health of sedentary girls and to keep girls involved in physical activity.</td>
<td>GoGirlGo! identifies and weaves together quality resources within each community and has developed a curriculum providing tools to get girls active</td>
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<td>PAVE (Project Anti-</td>
<td>This is a program designed for girls</td>
<td>Girl Scout Council of Greater St. Louis</td>
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<td>This is a program designed for girls</td>
<td>This is a program developed by the</td>
<td>This is an innovative program</td>
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<td>Violen Education) of the Urban Girl Scout Program</td>
<td>who live in un/underserved areas of St. Louis City</td>
<td>Urban Girls Scouts of American developed to address the problem of youth violence. Helps girls grow strong by empowering them to prevent violence in their lives.</td>
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<td>2130 Kratky Road St. Louis, MO 63114 <a href="http://www.gscgsl.org">www.gscgsl.org</a> 314.890.9569</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girl Talk</td>
<td>This program is designed for middle school girls.</td>
<td>Girl Talk is a student-to-student mentoring program that pairs middle school girls with high school girls who serve as mentors.</td>
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<td>This program aims to build self-esteem, learn the importance of community service and most importantly, benefit from a valuable relationship with a high school Girl Talk mentor. In turn, the high school leaders gain a sense of accomplishment knowing they’ve helped make a difference in the lives of many young girls.</td>
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<td>Girl Talk 3060 Peachtree Road NW Suite 2000 Atlanta, Georgia 30305</td>
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<td>Girls Inc. Media Literacy</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls of any age.</td>
<td>This is a national program that encourages girls and other media consumers to evaluate the messages in media such as television shows, films, CDs, newspapers, websites, music videos, magazines and video games.</td>
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<td>This program help girls develop the skills to wade through the media messages that bombard them.</td>
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<td>Project Assert (Assessing Strengths and Supporting Effective Resistance in Teaching)</td>
<td>This program is designed for African American girls and boys</td>
<td>This is a five-year research and curriculum development project based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Its aim is to create curricular materials that provide guidance</td>
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<td>This program focuses on adolescent development, particularly the racial identity and moral development.</td>
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<td>YWCA Teen Voices: “Make a Mural, Make A Difference”</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls on Malden, MA</td>
<td>This program is a celebration of cultural diversity. 15 portable murals were created by teams of students for display in public spaces.</td>
<td>Phone: 617.426.5505  Website: <a href="http://www.teenvoices.org">www.teenvoices.org</a></td>
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<td>Teen Voices</td>
<td>This program is designed for teen girls in Boston.</td>
<td>This is a journalism mentoring program which produces the national magazine Teen Voices. Its motto, “Because you’re more than just a pretty face,” by engaging local teen girls in writing about the real issues they deal with daily – none of the dating games, makeup, and diet tips that are the fill of self-esteem-eroding mainstream magazines.</td>
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<td>Girls Circle</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls from ages 9-18.</td>
<td>This program integrates relational theory, resiliency practices, and skills training in a specific format designed to increase positive connection, personal and collective strengths, and competence in girls. It is a strengths-based, skill building approach creates a safe space for girls to address risky behaviors, build on protective factors, and improve relationships in a format that It aims to counteract social and interpersonal forces that impede girls’ growth and development by promoting an emotionally safe setting and structure within which girls can develop caring relationships and use authentic voices.</td>
<td>Girls Circle Association  A Project of the Tides Center  458 Christensen Lane  Cotati, CA 94931  Phone: (707) 794-9477 <a href="mailto:support@girlscircle.com">support@girlscircle.com</a></td>
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<td>Program</td>
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| **G.I.R.L.S. (Growing Individuals Reacting to Life's Struggles) Project** | This program is designed for teenage girls. Led and run by and for teenage girls, the G.I.R.L.S. Project acts as a catalyst for social change. It strives to avail resources, hone leadership skills, and nurture personal growth in a safe, comfortable, and enabling environment. | Through structured leadership activities the G.I.R.L.S. Project engages, educates, and prepare girls to become effective leaders. The program offers weekend peer leadership training retreats, biweekly round-table discussions on an eclectic assortment of girl-oriented topics, and Girl TV, a weekly interactive cable TV show broadcasted in Boston and surrounding areas. | G.I.R.L.S. Simmons College Boston MA  
www.thegirlsproject.org. |
| **Big Sister Association of Greater Boston** | This program is designed for girls of all ages in Boston. This is a community-Based Mentoring program, in which girls (Little Sisters) are individually matched with caring and committed women volunteers (Big Sisters). | Helping girls achieve their full potential through positive mentoring relationships with women. | Phone: 617.236.8060  
Fax: 617.239.8075  
Website: www.bigsister.org |
| **Amachi**                                   | This program is designed to mentor daughters of incarcerated parents. This program is part of a Community-Based Mentoring (Big Sisters) and partnerships with faith-based community groups. | The program's name derives from a Nigerian word meaning "Who knows what God has brought us through this child?" | Phone: 617.236.8060  
Fax: 617.239.8075  
Website: www.bigsister.org |
| **Sociedad Latina**                          | This program is designed to meet the needs of Latino adolescent girls. This is a nonprofit organization that provides a comprehensive, community-responsive array of programs designed to | Programs aim to instill in young people a sense of self-confidence and responsibility, showing them they can succeed despite overwhelming statistics that say | Tremont Street Roxbury, MA  
Phone: 617.442.4299  
Fax: 617.442.4087 |
<table>
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<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Program Description</th>
<th>Supported Groups</th>
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<tr>
<td>Girls Get Connected: Technology at the Crossroads</td>
<td>This program is designed for middle school girls in Boston</td>
<td>This is a project of Girls Get Connected, which inspires and prepares girls for careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.</td>
<td>Program includes hands-on workshops with women scientists, engineers, and IT professionals and explores issues in urban ecology. Girls learn to use geographic information systems and global positioning systems.</td>
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<td>Girls' LEAP (Lifetime Empowerment &amp; Awareness Program)</td>
<td>This program is designed for at-risk girls aged 8-18</td>
<td>This program trains in verbal and physical safety skills and self-awareness. LEAP helps girls develop a diverse set of responses to violence, beyond the extremes of passivity and escalation.</td>
<td>LEAP's physical skills techniques maximize girls' options and help girls to make safe decisions in spite of fear. The self-reflective skills strengthen girls' ability to say &quot;no&quot; in difficult situations, to create safe and constructive boundaries, and to identify and trust their own feelings.</td>
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<td>Girls For A Change</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls</td>
<td>The Girls For A Change model is built on our core values and uses social change, youth development and coaching to fully engage women and girls in creating change.</td>
<td>The program incorporates 4 modules: Girl Action Teams, New Girls’ Network, Girl Events, Girl Steering Committee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active Girls Initiative</td>
<td>This program is designed for girls 8-14 years old</td>
<td>This is a collaborative research project in partnership with Patriots' Trail Girl Scout Council and Brigham and</td>
<td>Program focusing on the fitness, health, and well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Safe Futures Program to Reduce Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Violence: The At-Risk and Delinquent Girls Component</td>
<td>Women’s Hospital.</td>
<td>Prevent and control of juvenile violence and delinquency through 1) reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors for delinquency. 2) providing a continuum of services for youth at risk of delinquency, as well as for juvenile offenders. 3) developing a full range of graduated sanctions designed to hold delinquent youth accountable to victims and the community, ensure community safety, and provide appropriate treatment and rehabilitation services.</td>
<td>Urban Institute 2100 M Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20037 (202) 833-7200</td>
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<tr>
<td>This program is designed to meet the needs of at-risk and delinquent urban girls</td>
<td>This program is a multidisciplinary, comprehensive, and developmentally appropriate service to meet the unique emotional and developmental needs of young women.</td>
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### Table 1
Comparison of Participatory Action Research and Traditional Investigator-Directed Prevention Research

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<tr>
<td><strong>Goals</strong></td>
<td>Develop and test efficacy of theoretically derived interventions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions</strong></td>
<td>Under conditions of high experimental control, intervention principles with broad application can be discovered</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
<td>Random clinical trials; high experimenter control over every aspect; quantitative research methods</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
<td>Clear conclusions can be reached regarding impact of intervention</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Limitations</strong></td>
<td>Disempowerment of communities; potential for iatrogenic effects; focus on deficits versus competencies; limited duration and focus of interventions</td>
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Appendix C. IRB documents

Northeastern University Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Signature of Parent or Guardian __________________________ Name of Student __________________________

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You will still be a part of the RALLY program even if you decided not to fill out questionnaires or participate in interview 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.

It is up to you to decide to be a part of the research project that includes 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
Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

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

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

Department: Counseling and Educational Psychology

Address: 214 Lake Hall
Northeastern University

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

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

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

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #7

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: April 14, 2010

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

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

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

Nan C. Regina
Director, Research Integrity

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Appendix D. StrongLinks Curriculums

**StrongLinks Curriculum (used in current study)**  
*(Subject to change based on the participant’s input)*

Each group will begin with music, snacks and check-ins. Each group will end with check-outs.

**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**  
2:30-3:20

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Justification:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

2:30-2:45 Music, snacks, check-in, hope box – introduce the idea and 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 others boundaries, and work together towards a common goal. Discussion linked to what its like to be in a relationship when things are all “knotted.” We will also include a discussion surrounding working with differences and linking this to relationships at home, in school, at programs.

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

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

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

**Justification:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theme: RELATIONSHIPS with family: mutuality
RALLY Goal: BELONGING

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

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

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

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

Justification

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

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS
RALLY Goal: REFLECT

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

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

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

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

3:10-3:20 Journal

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

Justification

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

Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS, SETTING GOALS, BEING PROACTIVE

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

Learning goals: The goals of this project are to help the girls with working together to accomplish a change project. They will learn how to brainstorm, respect each 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.

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

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

3:10-3:20

Journal on-line/ organizing oneself/ staying connected/reflection

Talk about how today’s group went. Did you feel like your voice was heard? What was it like to work on a change project with a group of peers? Did you feel like there was a lot of conflict?

Justification

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Justification*

See week five.
Week 7 – June 10th  
Theme: MEANINGFUL EVENTS, SETTING GOALS, BEING PROACTIVE  
RALLY Goal: ASSERT: To be able to participate meaningfully and productively and to help students to find pro-social ways to conduct selves.

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

2:30-3:00 Present their project

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

3:10-3:20 Journal: What was it like to be “heard” by the listeners at today’s presentation? What does empowerment mean to you? (We will explain this to them first)

Justification

See weeks five and six.
Date to be determined

Themes: Our cultural selves and sharing ourselves with the group

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

2:30-2:45 Music, snack, check-ins, hope box)
2:45-3:
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 a former Curley student, to come in and talk about her lifemap.
Date to be determined

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

**RALLY Goal:**

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

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

2:45-3: 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 (ie. 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 Hope box.
After school (date to be determined)

Theme: SELF & EMPOWERMENT
RALLY Goal: REFLECTION.

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

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

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

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

**Justification**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Group Session Format**
*Openings & Endings: The Group “bookends”*

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

Opening is meant to be brief and in a taking-turn style.

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

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

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

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

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

Guided Activity & Processing (45 minutes)
The StrongLinks group progresses from a focus on strengthening and working from belonging within the group, with peers, and with family toward a focus on developing new skills in finding ones’ voice/goals and then speaking out. Each activity is introduced by defining the topic/theme for the session and gathering girls’ input as to how it connects to their lives. This is the juncture at which the facilitators may draw upon creativity and flexibility to meet the needs of their population. For example, when this group was piloted, the theme of “relationships” was
introduced and the girls voiced their opinion and desire to talk about intimate relationships with boys rather than the planned discussion on peer friendships. At the conclusion of each activity, 5-10 minutes is dedicated to a facilitated discussion on the relevance of each activity. For instance, the facilitators may want to ask the girls what they liked or disliked about the activity or provide an adjective that described the activity in their perspective. They may want to ask about what they learned from today and how they might use what they learned outside of the group. The facilitators should also summarize what happened in group that day and the strengths that they noticed in the girls. This process is important in helping them to strengthen their reflection skills.
Session 1: Who are we?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Group activity: 40 minutes

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

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

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

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

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

**Ending: (5 minutes)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Group activity: (45-55 minutes)
- Activity #1: Social circles (20 minutes)
  - (To say to the girls): Facilitate a discussion about relationships
    - How do you define a relationship?
    - Who are we in relationships with? (families, friends, significant others, teachers, and community)
    - Are relationships important to you? Why? How?
    - What are some ways you would describe your relationships? (Prompt the girls to talk about each type of relationship).
    - Are there certain relationships that you feel are easier to manage? Enjoy more than others?
    - How about relationships that are hard for you? Make you upset?
- Activity #2: Human Knot: 20-25 minutes
  - (To say to the girls): Ask girls if they have ever participated in a human knot. Split girls in two groups and explain the directions of activity:
    - Standing in a circle, girls reach across and take hand of another girl in circle (cannot be next to you). Repeat with left hand (cannot hold hands of same person). The group then tries to unravel the "human knot" by unthreading their bodies without letting go of each other's hands.
  - (To say to the girls): Begin discussion by asking what this activity was like for them? Easy? hard? Frustrated? Exciting?
    - Then link to metaphor of a “knotty relationship”. Ask girls what they think its like to be in a relationship when things are all “knotted.” Facilitate a discussion surrounding working with differences and linking this to relationships at home and in school.
      - Working thru “knots” in relationships:
      - Think of a relationship that is important to you and a “knot” in that relationship
      - What can we do to work thru problems/issues?
      - Is it sometimes good to have knots? Are there certain things that bring up knots more than others (i.e., boys, culture, how we dress)?
      - Does it help to think about what OTHER PERSON IN RELATIONSHIP may be feeling/thinking?
      - Is it hard to express what we need/want?

Transition: (5 minutes)

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

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

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

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

**Justification:** See week 2

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

**Opening: (15 minutes)**

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

**Group activity: (45-55 minutes)**

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

- **Activity #2: Role playing: 30-40 minutes**
  - Hand out index cards with names of well known partners/ couples (please try to choose celebrities that represent diversity in race and sexual orientation). It may help to have a description of the character couples.
    - Examples: Obama’s, Beyonce/JayZ, Ellen & Portia & Will Smith/Jada.
  - Ask girls to find their partner, sit down together and begin to brainstorm a possible role-playing scenario of a misunderstanding/ disconnection in the relationship.
- Ask for 2-3 groups to volunteer to perform.
  - After each performance, have all girls collectively discuss how the character “couple” can work to resolve the disconnection.
- Wrap up activity with a brief summary of experience/ important learning points

**Transition: (5 minutes)**

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**
In their journal, the girls will be asked to write about: *a gift you have received from a significant family member or a family member that you look up to). This is not a gift object, but an inherited gift, such as that of intelligence, or compassion.*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- After answering this question, remind the girls to give their journal to a facilitator and to take their box over to the other facilitator to pick out their bead. These will be stored in their Hope boxes.
Session 4: Who we are and what we hope

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Materials:** video

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)
- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): What part of Anna’s story did you connect with the most or find inspiring?
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes
- Check for any final cleanup needs
Session 8: Stress: What stresses us out?

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

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

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

Materials: Poster board, markers

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

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

**Ending: (15-20 minutes)**
- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): *How do you define stress? What is a big stressor in your life? How do you deal with it?*
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 9: Stress and Resiliency (Clay Runes)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Materials: Yoga video and yoga mats

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

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

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

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)
- Call one girl at a time up to the table to get their journal and their snack.
- Inside the journal include the following prompt (it is best to write it inside for them as it is more concrete): How did your body feel during yoga? What did you like and dislike about the experience?
- Invite them to write, draw, or illustrate something about the prompt or anything else that interests them.
- In the last couple of minutes, warn them that their time is almost up.
- Begin to call each girl up to hand in their journal and collect a bead to put into their boxes.
- Check for any final cleanup needs.
Session 11: Relationships and Building Trust

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

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

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

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

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

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

Explain to the girls:


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

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

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

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

Sample Questions to Ask During Debrief

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

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

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

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

Transition cleaning: (5 minutes)

Ending: (15-20 minutes)

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

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

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

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

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

**Opening: (15 minutes)**
- Check-in (without music playing)
- Play music of one of the participants. Offer the girls the chance to dance, drum out the sound, listen to it, react to it, and/or to talk about why they like it.
- Remind them that this will be brief. At the conclusion of the song, today you may or may not decide to leave the music playing for the remainder of the group. Because this is the celebration day, you may be able to be more laid back. Base this decision on the group and if they can handle that throughout the entire group.

**Group activities: (45-55 minutes)**

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

**Activity #2: (10-15 minutes) Bracelets.** To say to the girls: Today we are going to design and construct our StrongLinks bracelet. This bracelet can be a reminder to you of all that we did as a group over the past 12 weeks. It can remind you of the friendships and connections that you made with the members of this group and of the lessons that you learned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transition cleaning: (5-10 minutes)

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

Pre-Group Questionnaire

Demographic information

1. Who do you live with?

2. How old are you?

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

4. Where do you live? How long have you lived in _____?

5. Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?

6. Where were you born? How would you describe your ethnicity
   a. African American
   b. Hispanic
   c. Caucasian
   d. Other

7. Do you have a religious or spiritual affiliation?

8. Create a family genogram and discuss ages/locations/strengths

Relationships

General:

9. Who are the most important people in your life? What do you value about your relationship with them? How do you feel when you are with them? What do you know about the other person’s experience of being in the relationship with you?

10. When you think about conflict in relationships, what comes up for you? (i.e., positive images, negative images, memories)
11. Do you ever feel reluctant to express your anger and other negative emotions in your relationships?

**Family:**

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

13. Describe your relationships with your mother/other female guardian?

14. What do you worry about in your home, if anything?

15. Do you feel comfortable talking to your parents? About what?

**Peer:**

16. Would you say that you have close friends? Do you feel like you can be “real” with them?

17. Do you have any conflict with peers at school? If so, how do you handle this conflict? How does it make you feel?

18. How would you define friendship?

19. Have you had a romantic relationship? If so, how long and can you describe.

**Community:**

20. What is it like growing up in your neighborhood? Do you have any conflict in your neighborhood?

21. What are the values of your school? Do you agree with them? Are students treated fairly? Do you feel safe in school?

22. Does the school encourage you to have relationships with teachers and staff? Who can you talk to in the school? Have you ever talked to a counselor?
23. Do you have someone you can call a “mentor” or look up to at school or in your community that is not a family member?

_Culture:_

24. Do you feel like there are stereotypes about what a girl should be like? Act? A girl of ____ descent? Expectations?

25. Who gets to define what is “normal”?

26. Think of a time when you felt different or on the “outside.” What was this like for you?

27. Do you feel certain people have more privilege/ have it easier/ advantage then others?

**Interests and perceived strengths and weaknesses**

28. What do you like to do with your free time?

29. Now think about yourself and your life now. How you describe how you are doing?

30. What do you think are your strengths? What are you really good at? (ie. academics, sports, reading, singing etc.)

31. How do you describe thriving/ doing well?

32. What do you think you struggle with? What is hard for you? (ie. academics, sports, reading, singing etc.)

33. 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**

34. Do you like art, arts and crafts, dance, drama, writing, poetry, reading and/or music? If so, what do you like?
35. Do you think that you are good at the activities you mentioned in question #3?

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

Perceived stressors

37. 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?

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

39. How would you define stress?

40. What do you currently do to help yourself to manage or deal with your stress?

41. What are the biggest issue(s) affecting girls in your community or school?

Program specific questions

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

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

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

45. Do you have friends in the program?

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

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

Expression/Conflict
48. When you are upset, how do you typically express your feelings, if at all?

49. 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?

50. How do you think girls are supposed to handle conflict?

51. How do most girls and boys your age resolve conflict? Is there a difference?

52. Has there ever been a time when your thinking and feeling was different from what people around you were saying and doing?

53. How do you usually express/show anger?

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

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

**Future oriented questions**

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

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

58. What is your dream for the future?

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

60. Do you care about social issues?

61. Do you want to make a difference? How?
62. How about educating your community?

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.

Wrap-Up

Is there anything else you think we should know about you that you would like us to know?
Appendix E. Post-Group Questions

Post-Group Questions

Satisfaction questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Do you think this program would be helpful to other girls your age? Why or why not?

Relationship questions

General:

8. What have you learned about your relationships as a result of the group experience?

9. How has your experience in this group impacted other relationships outside of the group (if at all)? Cue: with peers, family, mentors?

10. Now that we have talked about relationships in terms of “being in connection” with others, what does it feel like to be “in connection” with others? Can you give an example from your life?
11. What does it feel like to be “out of connection” with others?

12. Has your definition or idea of a “mutual” relationship changed at all? Where there is equal give/take?

**Family:**

13. Has the group impacted your relationships at home at all? If so, how?

**Peer:**

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

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

**Community/School:**

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

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

18. (Refer to answers from Q ___). At the beginning of the group, you mentioned …about your school/ community. Has the group helped with …at all?

**Self/Culture:**

19. Did this group provide you with opportunities to talk about the ways in which your family’s culture supports and empowers you… challenges and frustrates you?

20. Did this group provide you with opportunities to talk about the ways in which the dominant culture (e.g., the popular media culture) supports and empowers you… challenges and frustrates you?
21. (Refer to Q__) At the beginning of this program, you described …as stereotypes of girls…. What could you do to question or change these perceptions/ stereotyping?

22. (Refer to Q__) At the beginning of this program, you mentioned that “normal” is defined as……do you think this norm is the truth?

**Experience**

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

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

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

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

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

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

29. Has this program been helpful to you in learning how to manage stress? If so, how?
30. Did this program meet your expectations? (ie. 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?

31. 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/Conflict**

- 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?

32. What have you learned about dealing with conflict…in family, friends, school, community….

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

34. 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?

35. How do you think girls are supposed to handle conflict?

36. How do most girls and boys your age resolve conflict? Is there a difference?

37. Has there ever been a time when your thinking and feeling was different from what people around you were saying and doing?

38. How do you usually express/show anger?
39. If you feel that you are in trouble, are you able to ask somebody for help?

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

MUTUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (MPDQ)
FORM A

In this section, we would like to explore your relationship with your female best friend. By best friend, I mean the one person with whom you have a close and intimate friendship.

Please tell us how often you and your friend experience each of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = Never</th>
<th>3 = Occasionally</th>
<th>5 = Most of the Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 = Rarely</td>
<td>4 = More Often than Not</td>
<td>6 = All the Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we talk about things that matter to my best friend, I am likely to …

- Be receptive 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Get impatient 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Try to understand 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Get bored 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Feel moved 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Avoid being honest 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Be open-minded 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Get discouraged 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Get involved 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Have difficulty listening 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Feel energized by our conversation 1 2 3 4 5 6

When we talk about things that matter to me, my best friend is likely to …

- Pick up on my feelings 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Feel like we’re not getting anywhere 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Show an interest 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Get frustrated 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Share similar experiences 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Keep her feelings inside 1 2 3 4 5 6
- Respect my point of view 1 2 3 4 5 6
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<th>1</th>
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<th>6</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Change the subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>See the humor in things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel down</td>
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<td>Express an opinion clearly</td>
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MUTUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (MPDQ)
FORM B

In this section, we would like to explore your relationship with your female best friend. By best friend, I mean the one person with whom you have a close and intimate friendship.

Please tell us how often you and your friend experience each of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = Never</th>
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<th>3 = Occasionally</th>
<th>4 = More Often than Not</th>
<th>5 = Most of the Time</th>
<th>6 = All the Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Have difficulty listening to me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel energized by our conversation</td>
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Appendix E.

Relational Health Indices (RHI)

(R) indicates that the item should be reverse scored prior to calculation of a mean score.

PEER (RHI-P)
Next to each statement below, please indicate the number that best applies to your relationship with a close friend.

1. Never; 2=Seldom; 3=Sometimes; 4=Often; 5=Always

1. Even when I have difficult things to share, I can be honest and real with my friend.
2. After a conversation with my friend, I feel uplifted.
3. The more time I spend with my friend, the closer I feel to him/her.
4. I feel understood by my friend.
5. It is important to us to make our friendship grow.
6. I can talk to my friend about our disagreements without feeling judged.
7. My friendship inspires me to seek other friendships like this one.
8. I am uncomfortable sharing my deepest feelings and thoughts with my friend. (R)
9. I have a greater sense of self-worth through my relationship with my friend.
10. I feel positively changed by my friend.
11. I can tell my friend when he/she has hurt my feelings.
12. My friendship causes me to grow in important ways.

MENTOR (RHI-M)
Next to each statement below, please indicate the number that best applies to your relationship with your most important mentor.

1. Never; 2=Seldom; 3=Sometimes; 4=Often; 5=Always

1. I can be genuinely myself with my mentor.
2. I believe my mentor values me as a whole person (e.g., professionally/academically and personally).
3. My mentor’s commitment to and involvement in our relationship exceeds that required by his/her social/professional role.
4. My mentor shares stories about his/her own experiences with me in a way that enhances my life.
5. I feel as though I know myself better because of my mentor.
6. My mentor gives me emotional support and encouragement.
7. I try to emulate the values of my mentor (such as social, academic, religious, physical/athletic).
8. I feel uplifted and energized by interactions with my mentor.
9. My mentor tries hard to understand my feelings and goals (academic, personal, or whatever is relevant).
10. My relationship with my mentor inspires me to seek other relationships like this one.
11. I feel comfortable expressing my deepest concerns to my mentor.

COMMUNITY (RHI-C)
Next to each statement below, please indicate the number that best applies to your relationship with or involvement in this community.

1. Never; 2=Seldom; 3=Sometimes; 4=Often; 5=Always
1. I feel a sense of belonging to this community.
2. I feel better about myself after my interactions with this community.
3. If members of this community know something is bothering me, they ask me about it.
4. Members of this community are not free to just be themselves. (R)
5. I feel understood by members of this community.
6. I feel mobilized to personal action after meetings within this community.
7. There are parts of myself I feel I must hide from this community. (R)
8. It seems as if people in this community really like me as a person.
9. There is a lot of backbiting and gossiping in this community. (R)
10. Members of this community are very competitive with each other. (R)
11. I have a greater sense of self-worth through my connection with this community.
12. My connections with this community are so inspiring that they motivate me to pursue relationships with other people outside this community.
13. This community has shaped my identity in many ways.
14. This community provides me with emotional support.

Note: Empowerment/Zest subscales
RHI-P items: 2, 7, 9, 10
RHI-M items: 5, 7, 8, 10
RHI-C items: 2, 6, 11, 12, 13

Engagement subscales
RHI-P items: 3, 4, 5, 12
RHI-M items: 3, 6, 9
HI-C items: 1, 3, 5, 8, 14

Authenticity subscales
RHI-P items: 1, 6, 8, 11
RHI-M items: 1, 2, 4, 11
RHI-C items: 4, 7, 9, 10
Appendix F.

Christina C. Tortolani

**Education & Training**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>Dartmouth Medical School</td>
<td>Hanover, NH</td>
<td>APA approved Pre-doctoral Internship in Clinical Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2011</td>
<td>Northeastern University</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>PhD in Counseling Psychology, Dissertation: “StrongLinks: A mixed methods study exploring urban ethnic girls’ experiences, connections and relationships”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2004</td>
<td>Boston College</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-2001</td>
<td>Villanova University</td>
<td>Villanova, PA</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science in Psychology, Pre-Medicine Concentration, Psi Chi National Honors Society, Dean’s List</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grants & Fellowships**

- **Co-Investigator, Pediatric Department Research Award**
  - Hasbro Children’s Hospital
  - Principal Investigator: Diane DerMarderosian, M.D.
  - Research funding for a pilot study to develop an 8 session Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) based intervention targeting adolescent girls with Anorexia Nervosa ~$10,000

- **Teaching Fellowship**
  - Harvard University, Graduate School of Education
  - Supervisor: Jacqueline Zeller, PhD
  - Teaching fellowship for graduate course, Individual Counseling and Psychotherapy with Children and Adolescents. ~$5,000

- **Pre-doctoral T-32 Child Mental Health Training Fellowship 5 T32 MH19927-16**
  - National Service Research Award (Kirschstein-NRSA), National Institute of Mental Health
  - Principal Investigator: Gregory Fritz, M.D.
  - Sponsor: Robyn Mehleneck, PhD
  - Warren Alpert Brown Medical School, Department of Child Psychiatry,
  - Training grant that targets two research projects and interdisciplinary collaboration in the field of pediatric eating disorders. ~$5,000

- **Early Career Investigator Travel Fellowship**
  - Academy of Eating Disorders/National Institute of Mental Health
  - Travel grant to attend the 2009 International Conference on Eating
Disorders, Cancun, Mexico, including the Research Teaching Day offered by AED and the Eating Disorders Research Society (EDRS), ~$1500

**Departmental Travel Award**  
**Northeastern University**  
Travel award to attend the 2008 International Conference on Eating Disorders, Seattle, WA. ~$500

**Publications**


**Manuscripts in Preparation**


**Tortolani, C.C.**, Mehlenbeck, R., DerMarderosian, D., Nassau, J., & Houlihan, E. Eating attitudes and behaviors in a clinical sample of adolescents with Type 1 Diabetes versus eating disorders. *(In preparation).*

**Tortolani, C.C.**, Mehlenbeck, R., DerMarderosian, D., Nassau, J., & Houlihan, E. Measures of medical stability in a clinical sample of male and female adolescents with anorexia nervosa. *(In preparation).*

**Professional Presentations**


Type 1 diabetes versus eating disorders. Poster presented at Rhode Island Hospital’s Research Celebration.


**Professional Affiliations**
Supervised Clinical Experience

Pre-doctoral Intern
Dartmouth Medical School/ West Central Behavioral Health
Lebanon, NH
July 2010 - July 2011
Implemented individual and couples psychotherapy for adolescent and adult outpatient population with a wide range of psychopathology. Received specialized training and supervision in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for PTSD/ Substance Use Disorder, two evidence-based treatments for PTSD. Co-led weekly groups, including Dialectic Behavioral Therapy, Batterer Intervention and Seeking Safety models. Administered, scored and analyzed intellectual and personality assessments. Attended weekly didactic seminars, which included Grand Rounds within the Department of Psychiatry; Trauma Seminar at the National Center for PTSD; Supervision Seminar; Clinical Practice Seminar; and Research Seminar.
Supervisors: Mark McGovern, Ph.D., Robert Morrell, Ph.D., Donna Steinberg, Ph.D. & Laurie White, LCSW

Advanced Practicum Student
Clinical Neuropsychology, Butler Hospital/ Brown University
Providence, RI
June 2008 - May 2010
Provide diagnostic consultation to psychiatric outpatients 1 day/week in Butler’s Memory Clinic and participation in a multidisciplinary diagnostic consensus conference. Provide psychological testing to hospitalized patients through Butler’s Psychological Consultation Service.
Supervisor: Paul Malloy, Ph.D.

Women’s Partial Hospital Program, Butler Hospital/ Brown University
September 2008 - August, 2009
The Women’s Partial Program utilizes Dialectical Behavior Therapy to treat women presenting with a range of psychiatric disorders. Responsibilities include treating patients in individual therapy, teaching DBT psycho-educational groups, and participating in daily team meetings.
Supervisor: Ellen Costello, Ph.D.

Advanced Practicum Student
McLean- Franciscan Child and Adolescent Inpatient Program
Boston, MA
September 2008 - April, 2009
Conduct biweekly psychodiagnostic assessments of children and adolescents, including intelligence, cognition, behavior, family functioning, and personality.
Supervisor: Ralph Buonopane, Ph.D.

Advanced Practicum Student
Boston, MA
Simmons College Counseling Center
Provide individual counseling to undergraduate and graduate students with a broad range of issues and concerns, including eating disorders, body image, sexuality, cultural identity, anxiety, depression, and self esteem, among others. Co-facilitate psychoeducational group on body image. Initiated an interdisciplinary committee to discuss, develop and implement a protocol for students with eating disorders. Provide psychoeducation to resident assistants and athletic coaches on eating disorders.
Supervisor: Helen Moschapidakis, Psy.D.

Practicum Student Framingham, MA
Fuller Middle School
September 2003-June 2004
Individual counseling for a multicultural population of clients aged 11-14 dealing with issues of depression, anxiety, self-esteem, identity and relationship conflicts, among other things. Treatment approached from family systems and supportive psychotherapy modalities. Co-facilitated weekly group sessions including: 6th grade girls’ counseling group, 8th grade girls’ psychoeducational group on empowerment and 8th grade girls’ counseling group on relational aggression. Served as consultant and facilitator of outreach programs to the Framingham community and staff.
Supervisor: Peter Szuch, Ed.D.

Research Experience

Research Associate Providence, RI
Hasbro Children’s Hospital Partial Hospital Program
June 2008-present
Lead manuscript preparation and writing of two retrospective studies. The first assesses the attitudinal and behavioral symptoms of eating disorders in adolescents with diabetes to a comparison group with eating disorders. The second explores the resolution of orthostasis as a medical marker of stability and successful treatment.
Supervisors: Jack Nassau, Ph.D. & Robyn Mehlenbeck, Ph.D.

Eating Disorder Clinic
November 2009- present
Implement an emotion-focused treatment program based off the principles of dialectic behavioral therapy for inpatient adolescents with anorexia nervosa.
Supervisors: Diane DerMarderosian, M.D. & Emily Katz, M.D.

Bradley Hasbro Children’s Research Center
January 2010- present
Provide data management and analyses for studies on weight regulation and behavioral interventions in children and adolescents.
Supervisor: Elissa Jelalian, Ph.D.

Research Associate Wellesley, MA
Psychology Department, Wellesley College
May 2008-July 2010
Assist with the manuscript preparation and writing of a study from the project, Voices of Adolescents on Acculturation and Resilience (VALOR).  
February 2004-May 2007

Devise, coordinate and conduct multi-level interviews of middle school girls in effort to access the demographic and psychological discontinuities among Latina adolescents. Responsibilities included conducting interviews comprised of demographic and immigration history and measures of health and body image using individual, family, peer and dyad scales. Other responsibilities included data input and statistical analyses. Supervisor: Nancy Genero, Ph.D.

Research Assistant  
Northeastern University & Harvard University Boston, MA  
September 2007- June 2010

Conduct dissertation project incorporating the conceptualization and implementation of a school-based program for urban adolescent girls. The project, Strong Links, focuses on girls’ strengths, sources of resiliency and relationships through expressive techniques. Supervisor: Mary Ballou, Ph.D. & Gil Noam, Ed.D.

Research Assistant  
Northeastern University Boston, MA  
September 2006- September 2009

Lead manuscript preparation on study of disordered eating, body image and nutrition knowledge in female collegiate athletes. Provide research assistance with several ongoing studies on the prevention of eating disorders  
Supervisor: Debra Franko, Ph.D.

Research Assistant  
Boston College Boston, MA  

Assist with development and publicity of Generation Pulse, a web outreach tool targeting adolescents and young adults around identity, health, relationship and other developmental issues.  
Supervisor: Belle Liang, Ph.D.

Research Assistant  
Butler Hospital/ Brown University Providence, RI  
July 2004- July 2006

Provide assistance with several ongoing studies on Body Dysmorphic Disorder, including a five–year longitudinal study on the course of BDD. Responsibilities include the advertising, recruitment and screening of potential study participants, diagnostic assessments, data input and statistical analyses, weekly meetings with research team and manuscript writing and poster preparation.  
Supervisors: Katherine Phillips, M.D., Elizabeth R. Didie, Ph.D.

Research Intern  
MIDAS, Rhode Island Hospital/ Brown University Providence, RI  
September 2004- September 2005
Conduct semi-structured diagnostic interviews for an ongoing clinical-research study, MIDAS project (Methods to Improve Assessment and Services). Responsibilities also include compiling and writing a comprehensive Psychological Report, and participating in weekly case conferences and journal seminars discussing current and relevant issues pertaining to diagnostic procedures. 
Supervisor: Director, Mark Zimmerman, M.D.

Research Assistant
Joslin Diabetes Clinic
Boston, MA
March 2002- November 2003
Research the psychological and health literature on the co-morbidity of type I diabetes mellitus and eating disorders present in adolescent females. Work included critical analysis of comprehensive literature and data analysis. 
Supervisor: Ann Goebel-Fabbri, Ph.D.

Teaching Experience
Guest Lecturer- Graduate School of Education
Harvard University
Boston, MA
February 2010
Guest lectured on the ethical and legal issues in counseling with children and adolescents for course, “Individual Counseling and Psychotherapy.”

Adjunct Professor- Counseling Psychology Master’s Program
Rhode Island College
Providence, RI
Fall, 2009
Developed a master’s level curriculum for course, “Quantitative Measurement and Test Interpretation.”

Spring, 2010 and Summer 2009
Developed a master’s level curriculum for course, “Cross-Cultural Development.” Coursework was applicable to student’s clinical experience as well as provided students with opportunities for reflection and growth.

Teaching Assistant
Northeastern University
Boston, MA
January 2007- present
Co-teach feminist psychology graduate course (Spring 2007 and Spring 2008). Responsibilities include class preparation, lectures and grading. 
Supervisor: Mary Ballou, Ph.D.

Guest Lecturer-Undergraduate Psychology
Northeastern University
Boston, MA
October, 2007
Guest lecture titled, “Eating disorders among the college population and application of a behavioral approach: Dialectic Behavioral Therapy” for Mental Health & Counseling course.
October, 2007
Guest lecture titled, “Exploring the connection between media, body image and eating disorders” for Counseling Theories course.

Guest Lecturer- Counseling Psychology Master’s Program
Northeastern University Boston, MA
November, 2007
Guest lecture titled, “Relational health, adolescent girls’ friendships and women’s ways of being” in Counseling Theory & Process course.

November, 2006

Guest Lecturer – Group Counseling, Master’s Level Boston, MA
Boston College
October, 2004 and November, 2005
Guest lectured on the behavioral and therapeutic processes and interventions of group counseling with children.

Invited Addresses

Invited Speaker
Brown Medical School Providence, RI
January & April 2010

Invited Speaker
Our Lady of Mercy Middle School East Greenwich, RI
June 2009
Presented *Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies* to 450 elementary and middle school students.

Burrillville High School Burrillville, RI
June 2008
Presented *Understanding eating disorders today: Knowing the signs, symptoms and how to help.*

Other Professional Experience

Clinical Rater, Butler Hospital/ Brown University
July 2009- June 2010
Conduct neuropsychological testing for the research study, Dominantly Inherited Alzheimer’s Network (DIAN) funded by the National Institute on Aging.
Supervisor: Steven Salloway, M.D. & Paul Malloy, Ph.D.
Group Facilitator
Anorexia and Bulimia Association of Rhode Island Providence, RI
May 2008 – June 2010
Develop and facilitate bi-weekly support groups for eating disorder patients, including ongoing process-oriented, time-limited, skills-based groups and book clubs. Supervisor: Steve Emmet, Ph.D.

Case Manager, Partial Hospital Program Cambridge, MA
Cambridge Eating Disorder Center
May 2007-August 2007
Provide a comprehensive continuum of care for adolescent and adult patients with eating disorders. Responsibilities include guiding patients in developing goals and areas of need, evaluating effectiveness of care plan and progress made by patients and negotiating insurance coverage. Facilitate daily psychoeducational and therapeutic groups, meal supervision and family meetings. Supervisors: Sherrie Delinsky, Ph.D. & Seda Ebrahimi, Ph.D.

Counselor Newton, MA
The Academy for Physical and Social Development
August 2004-May 2006
Co-facilitate 8 weekly therapeutic activity groups designed to help children ages 5-16 develop self-confidence, self-esteem and improve social skills. Groups focus on physical, verbal and social interaction through behavioral interventions, cooperative play, and supportive dialogue. Conduct twice-yearly conferences with parents. Perform case history assessments and draft psychological reports for individual clients as well as help direct and support graduate interns in counseling technique and process. Supervisor: Ken Barringer, M.A., LMHC

Counselor Newton, MA
Camp Nonantum
Summers 2005 & 2006
Therapeutic day program designed to help children aged 6-13 increase self-confidence both physically and socially. Responsibilities included individualized behavior management, and co-management of activities aimed at helping campers develop social and coping skills in a group setting. Areas of work focused on learning friendship skills, becoming more assertive, reducing anxiety, learning to channel energy in a positive manner, coping better with transitions and frustration and learning problem solving and negotiation skills. Supervisor: Director, Jessica Capone, M.A., LMHC

English Language Institute, Pine Manor College Chestnut Hill, MA
Director of Residence Life & Student Activities
March 2006- December 2006
Supervise and mentor international students through collaborative learning and English conversation training. Program focuses on inclusive leadership whereupon the diversity of cultures, ideas, perspectives and voices are shared and valued.
Graduate Consortium in Women's Studies  Boston, MA
Northeastern University Representative, Steering Committee
October, 2007
Involved in the planning, recruitment and organization of the 3rd Graduate Student Conference of the Graduate Consortium in Women’s Studies at MIT on April 4 and 5th, 2008.

SPSS Training
Certificates in Introduction to SPSS & Tables  Boston, MA
December 2006
Certificate in Intermediate SPSS
April 2007