

**GENDERED MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXINESS AND THEIR
EFFECTS ON GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

by:

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Abstract

Using the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay as a case study, this research focuses on how girls receive, understand, and resist dominant messages of femininity, heterosexuality, and the body that value sexiness over intelligence and academic success in the hidden curriculum in Ontario schools. The study explains how preadolescent girls age 8-14 are affected by the mass media, but also how they negotiate competing discourses in the hidden curriculum and may resist them. Premised on the fact that girls' thoughts, experiences, and opinions matter, the study utilizes girls' voices, stories, and ideas to provide solutions for the overwhelming evidence of gender disparities in the hidden curriculum. A feminist qualitative perspective is the foundation for the research, using focus group discussions to provide the space and time for preadolescent girls to reflect and offer their interpretations of the social world, shedding light on the lives and experiences of girls' by speaking with them, rather than about them. Through the use of the focus groups, girls' perspectives can provide valuable knowledge to assist educators to better serve the needs of girls at school. The results of the research indicate that preadolescent girls' educational experiences are affected by media content that continues to represent girls through features of heteronormative femininity.

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Dedication

To my incredible nieces, the inspiration behind this research project, you motivate me to work towards a more inclusive world where gender equality is no longer a myth.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Description of Intended Research Study

The intent of this research is to focus on how girls receive, understand, and resist dominant messages of femininity, heterosexuality, and the body that value sexiness over intelligence and academic success in the hidden curriculum in Ontario schools, using the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay as a case study. Building from Evans, Rich, Allwood, and Davies' (2008) study on how schools ascribe meaning and value to the body through the formal curriculum and the informal curriculum, my research sought to understand how media content, parlayed through the hidden curriculum, impacts girls' education and development. Because the mass media shapes, strengthens, and activates idealized female image and appearance focused messages in the hidden curriculum (Gaskell, 1992; Kenway, 1993; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Lavine, Sweeney & Wagner, 1999; Valli, 1986), this research examines how preadolescent girls age 8-14 are affected by the mass media, but also how they negotiate competing discourses in the hidden curriculum and resist them.

In addition to the effects of media, I also focused attention on the hidden curriculum, one of the most important aspects of education (Raymond, 2003). While the hidden curriculum has generated a significant body of research (see for instance Basow, 2004; Dreeben, 1968; Giroux, 1983; Portelli, 1993; Raymond, 2003; Skelton, 1990; Snyder, 1971; Powell, 2007), there remains a considerable gap in the literature considering the effects of the hidden curriculum as perceived by students. This study, then, focused on the experiences of girls because many school environments have not been supportive of girls' growth and development (AAUW, 1998; Coleman, 1992; Davis,

1999; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Premised on the fact that girls' thoughts, experiences, and opinions matter, this research was conducted as a girl-focused study and utilized girls' voices, experiences, and ideas to provide pathways to address gender disparities in the hidden curriculum.

Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013) stipulate that experiences of sexism occur in multiple contexts, including girls' "everyday experiences of the classroom and their school's social world, as well as their vision of the future" (p. 203). Achieving media-driven standards of beauty has become an all-encompassing project for many preadolescent girls, and the media continually promotes beauty as necessary to achieve success, happiness, and popularity (Pomerantz, 2008). As Rogers (1999) claims, no matter what a girl accomplishes academically, without exhibiting the "right" body, she will never appear fully successful as girls are valued primarily for their ability to perform idealized femininity. As a consequence, intelligence is placed at a lesser value while sexiness, popularity, and compliance become the coveted achievement as they have become the key site for girls' identities in contemporary society (Bartky, 1990; Lamb & Brown, 1999; Myers, 2010).

A qualitative feminist methodological approach informed by post-structuralism, which examines the constraints of gender categories (Haraway, 1988) is used to further address the issue of gender inequity in tween girls educational experiences. Focus group discussions and photo-elicitation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007) are also used to provide the space and time for preadolescent girls to reflect and offer their interpretations of the media and their education. Focus groups with rich, wide-ranging, and dynamic discussions, grounded in the perspectives of the participants, facilitated the exploration of

girls' stories, voices, and experiences. This research discerns strategies for girls to empower themselves and to help them subvert the media-driven expectation of sexiness by fostering girls' self-esteem in ways that highlight their skills and competencies that are not exclusively based on appearance.

Personal Background

As a feminist scholar, it is important for me to share early on, and briefly, my voice and background experiences that connect me to this topic. This act of situating and locating, guided by Knight (2000), helps to place myself within context of the research, and informs the lenses through which I see the world, make connections and draw understandings.

I identify as a white, heterosexual, and cisgender woman. I am a member of a large family, with 3 brothers, 3 sisters, a Canadian mother and a Christian, Lebanese father. I spent most of my life with my parents and 6 siblings on a farm in Ottawa, Ontario. Being working class, my mother stayed home to raise her children, while my father worked days and nights as a chef.

My study into the influences of the media on the hidden curriculum and of how this process affects girls' educational experiences is fuelled by my experiences as a sister, aunt, friend, feminist activist and educator. I often wonder: what kind of world did we come from and what kind of world are we sending girls into? These questions have encouraged me to become increasingly sensitive to the images of girlhood in the media that tells girls they have little value, and the value they do possess is based on their ability to be feminine, sexual, and beautiful. As I continued my research as an activist, I saw the challenges that girls were faced with, and what the scholarship tells us is that girls must

deal with complex and unrealistic ideals of girlhood. My response to the images presented to girls was to offer a space for their voices, thoughts and experiences to be highlighted so that they could be better equipped to navigate the many issues they face in contemporary society. I hoped to encourage girls to explore their academic interests and abilities without restriction, and highlight their skills and competencies that are not exclusively based on hegemonic ideals of femininity.

Background and Rationale

Volman and Ten Dam (1998) argue that, “gender is an important structuring category in society, produced and maintained in various ways in everyday life” (p. 53). A critical component in the process of preadolescent girls development is the time they spend actively engaging and participating in their school environments (Deaux & Stewart, 2001), learning through implicit and explicit messages what it means to be a girl in today’s society. While dismissed by some as media moral panic (Cohen, 1987) or seen as proof of girls’ increased social power and agency (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Pomerantz, Kelly & Currie, 2009), the issue of heteronormative femininity, beauty, and sexiness is the focus of a significant body of scholarship. According to Levy (2005), sexiness is not defined by sexual pleasure; rather sexiness can be described as the consumption and appeal of the ideal commercial image: sexual desirability, natural beauty, and the perfect healthy and toned body. Several theorists investigate the impact it seems to be having on girls’ well-being (such as Brumberg, 1997; Daune-Richard & Devreux, 1992; King, 2007; Luhmann, 1990). Others explore the marginalization that many preadolescent girls feel about their identities (such as McLean, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995; McRobbie, 2000; Van Roosmalen, 2000). Lamb and Brown (2006) observe that girls are increasingly

perceived as being defined by their appearance, rather than by their scholastic abilities, encouraging girls to view themselves as second-class citizens who need not pursue an education but rather beauty, fame, and status as a sexual object.

The purpose of my study is to focus on media messages parlayed through the hidden curriculum that value sexiness and heteronormative ideals of beauty as more vital to girls' success than intelligence and academic excellence. I investigated how girls receive, understand, and resist heteronormative ideals of femininity by asking them to share their complex stories and multidimensional experiences to provide girl-focused solutions as to how these messages might be subverted.

Several questions guided my research (See Appendix A and Appendix B for interview schedule), grouped roughly into three parts. Specifically, these are girls' perceptions of influences that shape femininity, girls' perceptions of school experiences, and girls' ideas about challenges and opportunities for resistance and subversion.

1. How do girls feel about the media they are exposed to and how do they make sense of how femininity, heterosexuality, and the body are constructed through the hidden curriculum? What are their perceived influences of the media on the hidden curriculum to which they are exposed?
2. How do girls learn about what is expected of them in schools, and how does it compare to what the media expects of them? How is their involvement and engagement in school influenced by those expectations?
3. How do girls think their experience of being female fits with their understanding of the school's expectations? How do preadolescent girls deal with, challenge, and/or subvert the social and educational expectations of their teachers and

schools?

Participant Recruitment

After careful consideration, I decided that the best method of participant recruitment would be through the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay (BGCTB), because the organization has an expressed interest in developing media education programs to aid in negotiating today's cultural environment and is keen to identify issues that are important to Canadian youth, as well as raising awareness and creating change. The Boys and Girls Club of Canada (BGCC) is a not-for-profit organization that strongly believes in the value of opportunity, respect, and empowerment, collaboration, and speaking out (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada Website, 2013). To help children grow up in a healthy, safe environment, the BGCC strive to achieve their core mission statement, "to provide a safe, supportive place where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and skills for life" (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada Website, 2013).

The BGCTB is currently located on Windsor St., and is the first centre in Thunder Bay that revolves around and focuses primarily on children. The need for services and programs that respond to the individual needs of children continue to grow, particularly for Aboriginal, new Canadian, and negatively racialized youth living in disadvantaged communities. To ensure that youth are given every possible opportunity to reach their fullest potential, the BGCTB is dedicated to equip youth to meet the challenges they face in the 21st century. Through various clinics, programs and workshops that focus on current and pressing issues that youth face in the community, the BGCTB is able to make a positive difference for young people and their communities.

Working directly with the BGCTB generated fast and effective access to youth empowerment programs and other advocacy programs that ultimately help girls become leaders in their own lives by cultivating their own sense of self, self-esteem, and sense of self-worth. The process of gaining access to the Boys and Girls Club involved many phone calls, informal presentations to administrators, and follow-up documentation because of the sensitive nature of this topic. I anticipated that finding girls and parents who were trusting and willing to participate would also prove to be a difficult task.

To establish familiarity and to gain an understanding of the culture of the organization, I began to commit time and energy into volunteering for the Boys and Girls Club's "On the Move" program. "On the Move" is a girl only after school outreach support program designed to empower girls ages 8-14 and offer them the tools necessary to become healthy, active, and confident young women. The group takes part in weekly activities that specifically aim to promote physical activity, healthy eating, and positive body image with a focus on boosting girls' self-esteem, self-respect and self-determination. "On the Move" values the interests and ideas of girls and creates a safe and inclusive environment with the opportunity for girls to plan and make decisions in the program, to participate in physical activity in their own way and to participate regardless of skill level (Boy and Girl Clubs of Canada Website, 2013). Activities include arts and crafts, self-defense training, swimming, gymnastics, hiking, cheerleading, hockey, and basketball, as well as various workshops on the importance of healthy bodies and active lifestyles. I started to volunteer every Wednesday evening from 4:15-5:00pm beginning October 2, 2013 and continued to volunteer even after the research had been completed. Through the "On the Move" program snowball recruitment was used which

entailed having girls recruit other friends who were not in the “On the Move” program to participate in this study.

Lakehead University’s Research Ethics Board approved this research (see Appendix C for ethical approval letter). Three peer group interview sessions were to be conducted with girls, 8-10 years old, and three separate peer group interviews with girls, 11-14 years old. Eight girls between the age of 8 and 10 returned their signed parental and participant consent forms and were able to participate in the focus groups. No girls between 11 and 14 returned the consent forms. The planned focus groups for that age were not done. I stipulate that this study was unsuccessful at recruiting an older age of participants because majority of the girls in the “On the Move” program at the time of this study were of a younger age demographic. Thus, I recruited 8 girls between the age of 8 and 10 through the “On the Move” Program. Parents and participants were first contacted to explain the nature of the study. The names and contact information of the participants, who indicated interest, were taken down and three peer group interview sessions that lasted approximately 45 minutes in duration were arranged. The time allotted to conduct the focus group was negotiated based on the regular time allotted to all of the programs at the Boys and Girls Club. Although the focus groups were not substantial in length, the attention and focus of the girls were held longer eliciting more in-depth responses.

I offered both the parents and the girls a separate cover letter and consent form to demonstrate my respect for the girls and to acknowledge their ability to practice self-agency. The parents and participants were reminded verbally and on the consent form of their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty or negative

consequence (see Appendix D for parent/guardian cover letter, Appendix E for parent/guardian consent form, Appendix F for participant cover letter, and Appendix G for participant consent form). The peer groups did not begin until after the consent forms had been signed. A follow-up activity and group discussion was also organized with girls and parents to share the results, to see if the study had affected the girls' awareness or if any changes had occurred because of their participation. I did not analyze the data or write the report until I gained permission and approval of the transcripts from all of the participants – I made changes as necessary. I also shared developments based on the study and how the girls could benefit from them. The parents and girls received at that time a summary of the study's written report (see Appendix H for summary of report). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; grounded theory was used to analyze the data that was collected.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The following literature review forms the framework for my methodology, data collection, and analysis. It addresses the major themes that run through and situate this research as well as how these key themes interact. These themes are: “tweens,” the curricula, how the hidden curriculum affects girls, and the influence of the media in the hidden curriculum. The first section on “tweens,” is an attempt to create an understanding and definition of the term for the context of this study. Descriptions of “curricula” is a brief overview of how knowledge is perpetuated in a school setting in order to provide an understanding of how schools operate on multiple levels. The section on the “impact of the hidden curriculum on girls” is a brief exploration of literature on how girls interact with the hidden curriculum. The section on “the influence of the media in the hidden curriculum” is used to situate and integrate the media into the educational and developmental process of tween girls.

Tween

This study focuses on how media content parlayed through the hidden curriculum impacts the education and development of girls aged 8-14. The cultural designation for girls in the age group between 8 and 14 (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Guthrie, 2005; Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1999) is referred to as late childhood, preadolescence, or, more colloquially, as tweens. Tween, which will be used interchangeably with preadolescence throughout this study, is chosen because it encompasses the contradictions and tensions that girls experience at an important point in their identity construction when they leave behind childhood and await teen status. Walsh (2005) cautions, however, that the

‘betweenness’ of tweens should not be taken too literally: “Tweens are not just ‘in between’ but they are somewhere. And that somewhere is an interesting, difficult, personal, and conflicted space” (p. 204).

The emergence of tween as a social category, according to Lamb and Brown (2006), is a marketing construct developed in the 1980s, which is more focused on girls than boys (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Mitchel & Reid-Walsh, 2005). It signifies a more sexualized girl age than previous pre-teen or sub-teen terms (Cook and Kaiser, 2004), which has been attributed to the earlier onset of puberty occurring more commonly in girls (Mitchel & Reid-Walsh, 2005). Although the age at which puberty begins depends on numerous factors, girls typically reach menarche between the ages of 8 and 14 (Mannheim, 2008; Posner, 2006). Visible body changes occur during puberty including the development of breasts, growth of body hair, and an increase in weight and height (Schowalter & Anyan, 1981), which is often “entwined with cultural beliefs regarding adolescent female sexuality” (Posner, 2006, p. 316). As Lee (1994) posits, puberty represents the beginning of womanhood, and thus, girls are often unconsciously entering a world within which their bodies become an overwhelming focal point for attention. In turn, girls may become more aware of their bodies and how others perceive it.

While tween bodies change in a myriad of ways, tween girls also experience changes in socialization. Tween socialization centres largely on appearance, increasing the social pressure to look and act a particular way. The focus on appearance and the prominence of beauty ideals within mainstream culture has profound negative effects (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Jung & Peterson, 2007; Sinton & Birch, 2006), as tween culture problematically “connects the achievement of a successful identity as a girl with

looking the ‘right’ way and buying the ‘right’ things” (Harris, 2005, p. 217). Harris (2005) notes that a key concern about tween culture “is that it inappropriately positions girls as ‘grown up’: that is, they are inculcated into a world of money, sex, image, and lifestyle when they are in fact children who should be enjoying the innocent and more simple pleasures of a child’s life experience” (p. 214).

In addition to changes in physicality and socialization, tweens also experience major changes in the cognitive realm. Tweens are at an age where they gain more cognitive skills, become aware of the world around them, think about the future, and begin to construct their identities (Mitroff, 1997). The identity construction process is continuous and complex and is a time of intense role confusion (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). The advancement of moral reasoning about the social order (Frydenberg, 1997) is developed and preadolescence begin to understand the “implicit reciprocal contract between the individual and society” (p. 10), and the ways that structure and agency work together, and begin to weigh girls’ options regarding originality and conformity. These new more complex understandings of the self and society intimately affect the identity construction of girls. These identities are both personal and social, denoting the various dimensions of who one is and who one ought to be.

The media, especially pop culture and advertising, is replete with images of the ideal tween identity, including increasingly sexually explicit images, more tween-oriented entertainers, and more television, magazines, movies, and stores targeted to tweens, such as *Cosmo Girl* Magazine, the hit Nickelodeon show *Sam & Cat*, various online boutiques such as *Isabee Tweens* and clothing stores such as *Sofiabella*. Tween girls are pressured by media-driven cultural standards and ideals, and while opinions on

this vary from scholar to scholar, it is evident that physical appearance is one of the most significant characteristics of tween girls; or so the media and other socializing agents have led society to believe (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004; Mazur, 1986). As the tween identity is intimately connected to the media, it is vital to investigate how media content parlayed through the hidden curriculum helps train girls how to fit into this appearance culture.

Curricula

For the purpose of this study, the formal curriculum will be defined as it was by Hubbard and Pamela (1998): “all the learning experiences offered to students, including content, productions, teaching field experiences, enhancement activities, and evaluation procedures” (as cited in Coleman & Cross, p. 7). Formal curriculum implies that what is taught is intentional, planned, and executed and is often created from “publicly valued intellectual, social, cultural, political, and economic funds of knowledge...that have educational value to the individual and society” (Kridel, 2010, p. 376). In order to fully understand the formal curriculum, I highlight four major dimensions: the instructional curriculum (the teachers’ attitudes, values, and beliefs about the formal curriculum which affects planning and instruction); the operational curriculum (the learning and teaching implemented in the classroom as seen by a trained observer); experiential curriculum (what the students perceive, and experience as the curriculum and what is actually learned) (Klein, Tye, & Wright, 1979); and the hidden curriculum, which can be described as the “processes, pressures and constraints which fall outside of, or are embedded within, the formal curriculum and which are often unarticulated or unexplored” (Cribb & Bignold, 1999, p. 197).

The hidden curriculum is a popular and contested term in the field of education (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Kirk, 1992; Lakomski, 1988). This study focuses on how preadolescent girls experience and understand the hidden curriculum. Thus, I highlight some of the uses of the term as it is situated within academic literature, and make clear how I intend to use and define the hidden curriculum as a descriptive term to situate the research question, as it is a key term that will provide context for the remainder of the literature. While the formal curriculum is based on the premise that what is presented by the teacher and shared with the students is intended, the hidden curriculum implies that some aspects of the learning experience are unintended, or remain outside of the teachers' awareness.

Simply defining the hidden curriculum as unintended, however, does not constitute an understanding of the phenomenon. While there is no concrete definition of the hidden curriculum agreed upon by all scholars, Portelli (1993) suggests that, for many scholars, there are four ways of defining the hidden curriculum: as implicit but expected messages (McNeil, 1985); as unintended messages or learning outcomes (Eggleston, 1977; Saylor, Alexander & Lewis, 1981; Snyder, 1970); as implicit messages arising from the structure of schooling (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1982; 1980; 1971; Giroux, 1981; 1978); and as created by students (Cusick, 1973; Eggleston, 1977; Willis, 1977). The hidden curriculum has also been described as "the unstudied curriculum" (Overly, 1970); "what is learned in schools" (Dreeben, 1968); and as "by-products of schooling" or "side-effects" (Vallance, 1973-74).

While scholars do not agree upon one solid definition of the hidden curriculum, there is some agreement on the content taught or learned including students' beliefs,

values, and behaviours along with their self concept, thoughts on culture and life, and the norms that structure society (Grossman & Grossman, 1994; Renzetti & Curran, 1999; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Apple and King (1977) extend the socialization process of the hidden curriculum to include two forms: weak and strong. A weak hidden curriculum refers to the transformation process of children's cultural meanings, and the rules they apply to everyday life. While, a strong hidden curriculum refers to:

[a] sense of control wherein education in general and the everyday meanings of the curriculum in particular were seen as essential to the preserving of the existing social privilege, interests, and knowledge of one element of the population at the expense of less powerful groups (p. 34)

Both forms of socialization help to explain why some scholars argue that the hidden curriculum is important in the educational learning process of students, perhaps even more so than the formal curriculum (Tyler, 1949; Dreeben, 1968).

For the purpose of this study, the hidden curriculum is defined as “the distinction between the curriculum as a planned experience and what, as a matter of fact, students experience” (Sockett, 1992, p. 561). I chose this definition because the intent of this study is to focus on the nature and effects of the hidden curriculum as perceived by female students.

As Apple (1982) and Giroux (1978) note, the hidden curriculum produces cultural homogeneity which acts to maintain and preserve, through the process of schooling, existing cultural, political, economic, structural, and social arrangements within society. Giroux (2001) reminds us that the media is a far more prominent source for the hidden curriculum and hidden messages in schools than in the past and is an essential component

in the process of understanding how schools “function to reproduce and sustain the relations of dominance, exploitation, and inequality” (p. 56). Thus, to further explore the relationship between the hidden curriculum and the social factors that contribute to gender inequalities in the classroom, I focus on how media content, as a source of the hidden curriculum, impacts tween girls’ education by listening to girls’ stories, voices, and experiences.

Impact of the Hidden Curriculum on Girls

Inside the classroom, educators are affected by media representations of girls, which inform the way educators interact and engage with girls through the hidden curriculum. The tendency of educators to normalize and accept girls’ preoccupations, concerns, and anxieties about their appearance and their bodies has accelerated, as educators unreflectively accept such behaviour as just ‘how girls are’ (Dalley-Trim, 2009; Oliver & Lalik, 2010). As a consequence, educators tend to dismiss or ignore the destructive concerns associated with girls’ experiences of the hidden curriculum, even though they can diminish girls’ academic abilities and future prospects (Galambos, 2004; Marmion & Lundberg-Love, 2004). Through the process of internalizing media messages of normalized female behaviour, educators may subvert efforts to help support girls and instead leave them “to fend for themselves within schools and in the larger society” (Oliver & Lalik, 2010, p. 304). As Walton (2011) notes, the problem with media depictions of education is that they have yet to demonstrate that issues of inequalities faced by students “is a problem that the school must address” (p. 220). Through inequitable media portrayals in which girls are constructed as ‘bodies first and people second’ (Bloom & Munro, 1995: 109), schools have become a cultural site where girls

learn about and internalize the many damaging narratives of the female mind and body (Akar-Vural, 2010). In this section, I provide an overview of some of the other ways that gender bias is introduced or perpetuated in the hidden curriculum.

To understand how gender bias is perpetuated in schools, I explore educators' gender perspectives and how these gender perspectives are articulated through the hidden curriculum. Several recent studies that examine the hidden curriculum are concerning. Reports suggest that girls receive less teacher attention, girls receive more comments about their appearance and ability to help than do boys, teachers express more emotion in communication with girls, and teachers use gender stereotypic toys and classroom activities (AAUW, 2001; Chick, Heilman-Houser & Hunter, 2003; Kimmel & Holler, 2011; Sadker & Sadker, 1995). Similarly, Dalley-Trim (2009) notes that teachers perceive girls as being obedient, affectionate, tenacious, and responsive, and perceive a higher ability for girls in verbal ability, while they perceive that males have a higher ability in math (Herbert & Stipek, 2005). Many scholars (such as Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999) suggest that stereotypes promulgated through the media explain group-based performance gaps in academic achievement in most domains concerned with intellectual or educational achievement between females and males in domains which females are traditionally considered less successful. Other research suggests that teachers are among the most common sources of negative comments about girls' academic abilities (Leaper & Brown, 2008), paralleling prior reports that some teachers perpetuate gender inequities in the classroom (see also AAUW, 1998; Basow, 2004; Jones & Dindia, 2004; Meece & Scantlebury, 2006). Leaper and Friedman (2007) suggest that girls' motivation to

continue in math, computer technology, and science are hindered as a consequence of their experiences with gender bias in the classroom (Hyde & Kling, 2001; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002), causing girls to distance themselves from male dominated academic domains due to the repeated discouragement they receive in school about their academic abilities (Leaper & Brown, 2008).

Further, according to Kimmel and Holler (2011) some textbooks used in schools continue to reinforce gender stereotypes that emphasize and display the beautification of girls' bodies, the presentation and encouragement of sexuality, and the displacement of girls focus from academia to the pursuit of attractiveness (see also Kilbourne, 2000). Gender biased images remain strongly present in the hidden curriculum and reinforce gender-stereotyped attitudes that inculcate among teachers as virtually all studies (for example, Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Davis & McDaniel, 1999; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; Meece, 2003) conclude that textbooks do not adequately reflect women's roles and occupations in society.

A closer look at the hidden curriculum as a significant and central domain for how girls learn about gender roles illustrates how understandings of beauty, sexuality, and femininity shape the educational experiences and outcomes of tween girls. Concerns continue to generate as media messages become intertwined with education, and schools foster and promote dominant gender scripts promulgated through the media. Media can be defined as a tool of communication that is used to distribute information to a wide audience (Akar-Vural, 2010), playing an integral role in shaping, organizing, and disseminating ideas, values, and information (Kellner & Share, 2007). According to Halliday and Blackburn (2003), media is not inherently good or bad. Rather, it is a

powerful agent of socialization that is important to read critically. Most individuals are affected by media in ways that are variously direct and explicit, and indirect and subtle. Over time, the media influences “beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that can change shared cultural norms and social institutions in society at large” (DeFleur & Dennis, 1998, p. 459).

Although extensive research has not yet been conducted that examines how media messages affect the development of educators perspectives on gender, a further examination of hidden classroom and school practices that proliferate gendered messages that shape how girls make sense of themselves, can help frame an understanding of how media messages parlayed through the hidden curriculum affect girls education.

As beauty, sexiness, and femininity are central foci of this research, I examine two prominent studies that connect the media to the hidden curriculum that base girls worth on docility and appearance. For example, the plethora of media-linked books in school lock girls into rigidly prescribed versions of how they should behave, collapsing the boundary between entertainment and education. Despite a petition by Harvard University's Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood in 2007, the decision by Canadian schools to sell Lil' Bratz books did not waiver. With titles such as Lil' Bratz Catwalk Cuties and Lil' Bratz dancing Divas, the MGA Entertainment Inc's top-selling doll, known for her miniskirts, skimpy wardrobe, boas, and high heel boots continue to be promoted to young girls in school (Ottawa Citizen, 2007). The relationship between Lil' Bratz and young girls has been shown to promote a provocative and highly sexualized image. According to Toomey (2009), the depiction of stereotypical gender behavior in children's literature and media leads to the often-rigid gender ideologies

children adopt in the first place. As the American Psychological Association (APA) task force concludes, the sexualisation of girls negatively impacts their “cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs” (APA, 2007, p. 2). Through the consumption of media-linked books in school, girls find that, as Wesely (2012) puts it, “the value of their sexual parts is sometimes thought to eclipse other aspects of their identities, such as their intelligence, ambition, fortitude, or humor” (p. 104).

Media messages that perpetuate stereotypes regarding beauty, femininity, docility, and sexiness have also been linked to teachers’ rationalization of male violence sexual harassment in school. According to Larkin and Rice (2005), girls as young as eight and nine years of age have reported being sexually harassed. Examples of harassment include, “attempts to snap bras, groping at girls’ bodies, pulling down gym shorts, flipping up skirts, nasty personalized graffiti, sexualized jokes, taunts and skits that mock girls’ bodies, staring, leering or stalking” (Stein, 2005, p. 64). Media messages that continuously normalize sexual harassment often cause teachers to rationalize such behavior as ‘flirting,’ ‘teasing’ or seen as developmental interest in the other sex (Stein, 2005). Girls’ experiences of sexual harassment in school interferes with their right as students “to receive equal educational opportunities” and lessens their quality of school life in general (p. 61). Rooted in sexual stereotypes perpetuated by the pop culture media, sexual harassment has become a part of the hidden curriculum as it is rendered normative in school settings, reminding girls that their right to equal education is overshadowed by inequitable gender relations that encourage girls to conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity, beauty, and sexiness.

The normalization of media messages in school causes educators to disregard how girls' bodies have become the focus of their identities in contemporary society. Examples such as the promotion of Lil' Bratz books, and sexual harassment in Canadian schools, send messages to girls that develop their position in the social structure of the school; girls are beautiful, feminine and sexual objects, not academic or intelligent subjects. Media messages parlayed through the hidden curriculum prime girls to value and emphasize their body and appearance over personality or intellect by encouraging them to learn and to participate in practices that focus solely on their physical attributes, and forgo their academic abilities and interests. As girls are encouraged to view the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of individual identity, it often results in a decline of self-esteem. Many girls exacerbate feelings of constantly pursuing the 'right' behaviour, the 'right' bodies and the 'right knowledge' but feel that they are never able to achieve it (Evans & Davies, 2004). What is revealed is that representations of girlhood are heavily regulated, enduring impossible contradictions of normative and deviant female bodies and behaviours and that girls can be influenced by the ideal of what they should look like, and of what constitutes femininity, as prescribed by the media and enacted through hidden curriculum (Pomerantz, 2009).

Contemporary gender discourse, however, supports the idea that girls no longer live in a sexist society as girls are currently equal and in some cases academically superior to boys (Ringrose, 2007). The discourse of "failing boys," suggests that girls now "outperform boys on tests and in college entrance examinations, as well as in the competitive drive for employment" (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013 p. 203). Thus, it seems counterintuitive to view girls' as struggling in the classroom (Kindlon, 2006;

Rimer, 2007). Contrary to these narratives, Greig (2012) notes that the problem of boys' education is informed by antifeminist backlash that reinforces hegemonic masculinity and does not consider the interplay between sexuality, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, and disability. Both boys and girls grapple with complex issues of sexuality, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, and disability that "powerfully shape students achievement" (p. 128). Thus, my thesis research challenges the idea that girls are now beyond sexism by highlighting their "everyday experiences of the classroom and their school's social world...[to] support the idea that girls are not past the need for feminism" (Pomerantz et al., 2013, p. 203).

Influence of the Media in the Hidden Curriculum

Pop culture media is one of the primary agents of socialization. Socialization is the process by which individuals learn about the culture, rules, values, attitudes, regulations, and self-concepts that are accepted in society (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega, & Weitz, 2007; Kalmus, 2007; Silverblatt, 2004). Through the media, messages and images manifest that influence how both female students feel, think, and act in the world (Gee, 2003). These messages are then interpreted in social contexts and then soon become part of one's social identity. Media messages are often ubiquitous, representing the shared socio-economic interests of the most powerful individuals and groups in society. Because these scripts are so repetitive, the repetition validates and normalizes the messages, and because the messages are so dominant, they often, less than consciously, become tightly interwoven with identity (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Raymond, 2003).

Such perspective signifies that media plays an important role in influencing public opinion, values, and beliefs. As McCombs (2004) explains, "The agenda of

the...media, becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public [and] is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion” (p. 2). Media messages in matters of education are perceived as particularly relevant and as correspondingly powerful because they often bring about an exchange of opinions or ideas between the media and education (McCombs, 2004). As Ward and Harrison (2005) note, exposure to stereotyped behavior through the media can be correlated with more stereotypical beliefs about the sexes as evidenced through gender-specific behavior, expectations, and stereotypes. According to Raymond (2003) educators are affected by societies “media-saturated environment and bring knowledge, values, and beliefs of media representations into the school environment” (p. 298). Generally, educators are unaware of the erroneous and inaccurate perceptions they propagate and promote through negative stereotypes or of how the hidden curriculum of the media effect education and schooling (Raymond, 2003). Nonetheless, the social reproduction of gender through media representations is often confirmed and normalized inside the classroom creating an environment where girls are taught about appropriate female gender roles and behaviours. The media’s incomplete, stereotypical representation of femininity denies the complexity and uniqueness of each female students situation.

While the interpretation and effectiveness of media messages by some educators will undoubtedly vary from other educators, “all interpretations should be treated as equally valid, if not equally persuasive” (Dalton, 2010, p. 4) in the classroom. Yet, this is not to imply that teachers and students alike are blank slates upon which...[media] imprint a uniform code” (Kimmel & Holler, 2011, p. 242) because “[w]e bring our selves our identities, our differences to our encounters” (Kimmel & Holler, 2011, p. 242).

Rather, it is to imply that that the media as a form of socialization is multivarious and complex (Kimmel & Holler, 2011) and that consumers of media must consider how they interpret and internalize media messages that they meaningfully and intentionally consume simultaneously and for a variety of purposes (Arnett, 1995). Consumers of media must also consider how content flows from one medium to the next (e.g. websites that treat television characters as “real” people, music and artists who are featured within television programs) (Brooker, 2001) and how these messages inform and mediate the interactions between educators and students.

To challenge stereotypes and bias about girls’ academic abilities, my research seeks to understand how media content parlayed through the hidden curriculum affects girls educational experiences by listening to girls lived experiences of the hidden curriculum. The variability of messages across media forms suggests that the inclusion of multiple media may be a productive endeavor in order to better understand how the media is parlayed through the hidden curriculum. Thus, the data for this study will encompass three different types of media: television, music, and magazines, which will allow for observations to be made regarding which media in particular, are most influential. It is also essential to articulate the type of media content one is examining. In this study, the sexualisation, beautification, and feminization of girls as depicted by the media will be examined.

As previously discussed, media is a primary institution of socialization that is saturated with normative gender depictions of inappropriate behaviours and images. The ability of media messages to permeate the hidden curriculum is complex and powerful and is affecting preadolescent girls educational experiences.

Summary

Media is a cultural production with enormous significance in the social construction and maintenance of gender norms and educational expectations. The recurrent interaction between educators and the media legitimate and perpetuate gender inequalities in the hidden curriculum. As media messages are consumed both consciously and unconsciously, many troubling issues emerge, not the least of which is a focus on hyper sexuality at the expense of intellectual development. The hidden curriculum acts as an exclusionary practice, which shapes girls to feel a growing confusion about their desires, abilities, thoughts and experiences, and discourages them from pursuing non-traditional forms of study or moving into leadership roles. As educational, cultural, and media messages continue to negate the knowledge of females, their scholastic abilities can be undermined. In light of the effects of media content parlayed through the hidden curriculum on girls to conform to hegemonic ideals of femininity at the expense of their identity and their educational goals, my work investigates, acknowledges and complicates definitions of femininity, advocates for social change, and complicates the very assumptions, myths, and stereotypes that inform preadolescent girls' experiences in school (Harris, 2004) by asking girls to share their complex stories and multidimensional experiences.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to focus on how girls receive, understand, and resist dominant messages of femininity, heterosexuality, and the body that value sexiness over intelligence and academic success in the hidden curriculum in Ontario schools.

Specifically, I explored these questions:

1. How do girls' feel about the media they are exposed to and how do they make sense of how femininity, heterosexuality, and the body are constructed through the hidden curriculum; what are their perceived influences of the media on the hidden curriculum to which they are exposed?
2. How do girls learn about what their school expects of them, and how does it compare to what the media expects of them? How is their involvement and engagement in school influenced by those expectations?
3. How do girls think their experiences of being female fits with their understanding of the school's expectations? How do preadolescent girls deal with, challenge, and/or subvert the social and educational expectations of their teachers and schools?

Methodology

In order to explore these research questions, I adopted a qualitative feminist methodological approach informed by post-structuralism, and drew critically on Gilligan's (1982/1993) research methodology that describes researchers talking with girls about their experiences rather than maintaining an objective or removed position. Feminist post-structuralism "uses post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity,

social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1997, pp. 40-41). Central to post-structuralist theory is understanding the role of discourse in (re)producing power and knowledge and challenging the ‘truth’ of the humanist subject (Davies, 2000). Encompassing both social practices and language, discourses are defined as systems of statements organized around common values and meanings, produced over time in socio-cultural settings, subjective experiences, and institutional practices (Hollway, 1989, as cited in Benveniste, LeCouteur, & Hepworth, 1999). Thus, a feminist post-structuralist approach recognizes that gendered identity is potentially changeable (Weedon, 1997) and thus, shifts understanding away from discovering objective facts and toward a discourse analysis concerned with “disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledges” (Gavey, 1989, p. 463). Within a feminist post-structural framework, various and contradictory discourses on femininity can operate simultaneously as there are a range of ways in which girls develop feminine subjectivities (Jones, 1993). Thus, although a particular feminine ideal of girls’ and women’s gender presentation is often encouraged and dominates normative gender expectations, there is no single way in which the understanding of girls as individuals, or as a group can be fixed. Gender norms are dynamic rather than static. This study deconstructs the language and texts of schooling and the media in order to decipher their possible meanings and the multiple discourses and subjectivities girls inhabit. A feminist post-structuralist methodology, thus, creates a process where light is shed on the lives and experiences of girls to uncover their knowledge about how the media affects their education, by speaking with them, rather than about them (Brooks, 2007; Collins, 1990; Smith, 1987) and by placing them at the

center of the research process to effectively capture their individual and collective stories and voices (Brooks, 2007).

I argue that a feminist post-structuralist qualitative approach is a particularly productive method for engaging with preadolescent girls with its focus on constructing girls' experiences and privileging girls' stories. The collaboration between feminist scholarship and post-structuralist thought provide the possibility for understanding girls' socialization in ways that do not position girls as simply socialized into their appropriate gender roles. Instead, a feminist post-structural theoretical lens seeks to understand how girls position themselves and produce their own subjectivities within oppressive patriarchal structures. In this way, girls are not seen as passive victims that are uniformly repressed; rather they "actively take up as their own the discourses through which they are shaped" (Davies & Banks, 1992, p. 3). Thus, in the context of this study, I explore and expose the gendered subjectivities of girls, and the ways they reject or navigate them, but also the way they are variously located within them. Through a feminist post-structural framework then, this study provides a space and give meaning for the construction of girls' individual and collaborative stories and experiences told through language, positioning language as a site of oppression and resistance.

Unlike other forms of data collection, a feminist post-structuralist approach requires that I be mindful of my standpoint as a woman and my experiences as a preadolescent girl, and of how my positionality can serve as both a resource and a hindrance toward achieving knowledge throughout the research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Scantlebury, 2005). For instance, through the use of a feminist methodology, I am able to recognize that my positionality will inevitably shape the study

design and the interpretation of the data. As Haraway (1988) explains, researchers in general, including feminist qualitative researchers cannot achieve objective, bias free research, nor is it desirable. Instead, they are encouraged to reflect on their relationship with the research participants, and the factors that shape the research interaction (Ellsworth, 1989). For this to be accomplished, I must acknowledge, guided by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), that I carry my own particular history, worldview, and biography, and must remain cognizant of how my subjectivity and positionality has impacted data collection, interpretation, and the representation of research participants (Edwards, 1990; Harding, 1987).

A feminist post-structuralist qualitative methodology encompasses a framework for understanding contemporary constructions of girlhood as shifting and fluid, affected by economic and social change, and intersecting with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, and ability (Driscoll, 2002; Gonick, 2005; Harris & Fine, 2004). Intersectionality, as a theoretical lens, places emphasis on the multiple dimensions of the girls' lived experiences so that the concerns enunciated through their narratives can be located through the multiple dimensions of their individual identity (Scantlebury, 2005; Price, 2005).

My intent was to collect the richest data possible and to help guide the co-construction of girls' experiences and stories. Focus groups will reveal, through group interaction, how the media affects girls educational experiences, and photo-elicitation to discover girls' perceptions of certain aspects of the media, in particular television, music, and magazines, and how it relates to their educational experiences. I approached this study with the intent to ask girls to tell me about themselves, how they made sense of the

media that they consumed and how they responded to the media images that were presented to them. I focused on the girls' stories and experiences to realize my research objectives which were: To understand how preadolescent girls deal with the social and educational demands of their teachers and schools; to identify how schools produce, resist, and or challenge media messages, and to understand how the media is enacted through the hidden curriculum and influences girls perceptions of heterosexual ideals of femininity and beauty and how these ideals affect their educational goals and ambitions.

Focus groups

Communication among preadolescent girls is a critical component to explore and uncover the relationship between female identity, mass media, and the hidden curriculum. I used two different techniques for collecting data: focus groups and photo-elicitation. For the purpose of this study, I organized focus groups to facilitate rich, wide-ranging, dynamic discussions, grounded in the perspectives of the participants. My intention was to discover more about how girls interact with each other in a group setting and again, how the media parlayed through the hidden curriculum affects girls' educational success.

Focus groups can be defined as an open-ended, participant driven "discussion designed to obtain perception in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 1988, p. 18). As this study focused on girls age 8-10, a particular type of focus group that focuses on preadolescents, referred to as peer group discussions, was used (see Hickey & Keddie, 2004). According to James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) peer group discussions provide the space and time for adolescence to reflect and offer their interpretations of the social world, permitting the exploration of their stories, voices, and relationships. Peer group interviews were beneficial to this study

because they allowed for plentiful data to emerge in a short period of time; they challenged and stimulated participants in ways that may not have taken place in individual interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003); and control over the interaction was “in the hands of the participants rather than the researcher” (Morgan, 1988, p. 18) resulting in better access to the participants opinions and conceptual worlds (Wilkinson, 2004).

During the process of inquiry, however, it was important that I examined the power dynamics between youth and adults. As Eder and Fingerson (2003) note, children lack power and have lower status than adults in western societies. Eder and Fingerson (2003) emphasize the importance of reciprocity for responding to power dynamics between adults and youth and offer four guidelines to establishing reciprocity: self-disclosure, taking action in the participant’s community, empowering the participants through your behaviour, and encouraging the development of insight and self-reflection.

Other relational elements emerged during the interview process, which include how the participants and I spoke from entirely different historical and social structures such as class, race, sexuality, and ability (Warren, 2001). As Warren (2001) suggests, “although situational, these perspectives shape the flow of the interview and, in its qualitative version, are taken into account by the interviewer in understanding the meaning-making process” (p. 84). As researcher, I recognized that I must encourage the interview to, as Warren puts it, “unfold reflexively as each participant looks at the world through the other’s eyes, incorporating both self and other into the process of interpretation” (p. 98).

As suggested by Orchard (2007), I provided food and beverages to express my gratitude for the girls’ participation and to make the focus groups more authentic and

conducive to discussion. During the focus groups, I wanted to learn from the girls in order to answer the following questions: What meanings do they derive from pop culture media? Do they use such media to negotiate a sense of agency in school? Do they feel that media impacts how they are treated in school? Do they feel that teachers, tests, and/or classroom practices replicate what they see in the media? What do their stories suggest to educators about what they can do to improve girls' educational experiences? To smooth the process of interaction and to help the participants overcome the repetition and fatigue of conventional focus groups (Collier, 1967) pictures were introduced during the interviews.

Photo-elicitation

In order to understand how my participants create subjective meaning, this study was designed to elicit girls' responses to media images and to provide windows into their thinking around the hidden curriculum. Accordingly, to initiate conversation during the focus group sessions, pictures of popular female celebrities who are featured in popular television shows, films, internet sites, and magazines that are aimed at tweens were printed from advertising photo shoots and fan sites and were shown at the beginning of the focus group. Pictures of female celebrities were used to help focus the discussion around topics relevant to the research, and to help spark interest and comments quickly after the focus group began. I chose to elicit photos of popular tween celebrities at the beginning of the focus group to avoid having the peer group discussions and my opinions influence how the girls answered the questions and interpreted the images, thus, providing a starting point for understanding the raw meanings the girls associated with each image. I selected images of popular female celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Taylor

Swift and Selena Gomez (see Appendix I for images of popular female celebrities used for photo-elicitation), because these media texts reinforce the message of who a tween should be; this is a technique known as photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Photo-elicitation can be simply defined as inserting a photograph(s) into the interview process to help focus the discussion around topics relevant to the research and to help interviewees feel free to talk by giving them something outside of themselves to discuss (Clark-Ibanez, 2004).

Photo-elicitation offers an opportunity to expand participation beyond the role of traditional interviews (Bolton, Pole, & Mizen, 2001; Monteiro, Campos, & Dollinger, 1998) allowing the photographs to “operate as a bridge between the distant social and cultural worlds of the researcher and research subjects (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel 2006; Harper, 2000; Wagner, 2002). As the range of voices, descriptions, experiences and meanings girls contributed through their observation and analysis of popular female celebrity images were uncovered, questions about their perspective on being girls were asked, such as: how do they think their experiences as girls’ fits with their understanding of the school’s expectations? How does it compare to what the media expects of them? How do they learn about what their school expects of them as girls? And, how is their involvement and engagement in school influenced by those expectations? To discern whether schools have differential gender expectations, the girls were asked to consider these questions in relation to the experiences of boys. Through the use of female celebrity images, this study collected each girls’ interpretations and perceptions of the media as a precursor to understanding how media messages are parlayed through the hidden curriculum; thus, eliciting photographs was a much more

efficient method than simply conducting an interview.

Although photo-elicitation is widely used and highly regarded in the social sciences (Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2002; Kolb, 2008; Meo, 2010; Wagner, 2002), some scholars argue that a primary drawback to using this method of inquiry is that power issues arise once the researcher chooses which images to discuss and which ones to eliminate (Meo, 2010). It is critical to understand the advantages and disadvantages to any given method of inquiry in order to produce research that is useful and meaningful to the participants. To do so, it is crucial to establish why, and how to effectively incorporate photo-elicitation into the interview process. First, as interview questions were asked about how girls thought celebrity images related to their experiences and observations in their general school environment, and how gender issues they were asked to comment on regarding beauty, sexuality, and femininity, relate to what they hear or see at school, each girl was given the opportunity to examine the images and use them to help answer the questions. The participants were given the opportunity to select which images to focus on and to decide whether or not to use the images. This gave the participants increased control during the focus groups (Close, 2007). Additionally, at the end of the first focus group participants were asked if they wished to add any images for future interviews. This technique facilitates the use of images that are relevant to the population of interest (Close, 2007).

Photo-elicitation was a useful strategy for collecting data in this study because displaying images not only elicited more information during the interview process, but also evoked “a different kind of information” (Harper, 2002, p. 13) from the participants. As Harper (2002) explains, “the difference between interviews using images and text,

and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation” (p. 13). This study utilized photo-elicitation to “connect ‘core definitions of the self’ to society, culture and history” (p. 13), providing insight into girls’ interactions with the media, their particular experience of popular media and how they felt about how media representations of girls parlayed through the hidden curriculum affected their educational experiences. As Meo (2010) argues, within education and youth studies, “the use of visual material with children and young people promotes rapport and enables researchers to grasp young people’s viewpoints and social worlds” (Capello, 2005; Clark, 1999; Epstein et al., 2006; Fischman, 2001). Although once undervalued and under applied, relative to word-based research (Prosser, 1998), photo-elicitation is now one of the most frequently used and widely known techniques in the social sciences (Bignante, 2010) with nearly limitless potential (Harper, 1998). Given this potential, my study utilized photo-elicitation to create dialogue in each focus group about how the media shapes and influences girls educational experiences, not solely on how girls structure their behavior and values in school, but rather on how the hidden curriculum perpetuates and encourages specific behaviours and values learned through the media.

Ethics

This research required an application to Lakehead University’s Research Ethic Board because it included human subjects (see Appendix C for letter of ethical approval). One of the ethical concerns in conducting focus groups is that I am unable to control whether the participants maintained confidentiality, given that there is no guarantee, as Leonard (2007) points out in her discussion of focus group implications for ethics, that

participants would not talk about the issues outside of the focus group setting. In an attempt to maximize the confidentiality, I gave an introduction in the focus group about the project, reiterated consent, privacy, and confidentiality issues, and discussed the basic rules and guidelines. I also stressed that responses may differ and that there were no right or wrong answers. Another technique I used to gain rapport and to stress confidentiality was to allow the girls to assign themselves a fictitious name that was used in all research reports.¹ Any means of identifying the participants was removed from this thesis and no information that could identify participants will ever be used in publications or presentations resulting from this research. As required by university ethics storage of data guidelines, all data gathered in this study will be kept for 5 years in a secure location at Lakehead University's Faculty of Education Department. The materials to be stored include, interview notes, audio recordings stored on a CD Rom, transcripts, and all other relevant materials collected from research subjects produced during the study (see Appendix D for parent/guardian cover letter, Appendix E for parent/guardian consent form, Appendix F for participant cover letter, and Appendix G for participant consent form).

Validity and Trustworthiness

In designing this study, it was a challenge to maximize the trustworthiness of the data analysis and discussion. Establishing procedures that enabled me to ask and address certain questions was useful such as: Were the girls inhibited by their responses due to the presence of their peers? Did they respond in ways to please their peers or the adults present in the room? As Scantlebury (2005) reports, a certain distancing may happen

¹ The names used in the reporting of data are pseudonyms.

between the researcher and children who identify with different ethnic groups. From what I could discern, this did not occur during the focus group discussions. One strategy I used to acknowledge issues of power relations, positionality, and personal accounts of oppression and to clarify and communicate across differences in a more authentic, cohesive, and less oppressive fashion was the informal and relaxed nature of the focus groups and focus group activities. Conducting the focus groups allowed me to, as Richardson and Rabiee (2001) mention in their discussion on focus groups, personally observe the group dynamics and behaviours and enabled me to acknowledge and analyze my role in shaping the conversation. Also, tape recording the focus groups helped me to remember not only what was said but how things were said, “probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures...then arranging and carefully documenting...results” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11).

To produce interview transcripts that demonstrated care, thoughtfulness, and responsibility for the girls’ shared narratives (Huber & Clandinin, 2002) and to gather a more valid account of each girls’ experience of oppression I listened “for what sort of person I thought the interviewee wished to present” (Luttrell, 2000, p. 5), searching for “recurring images, words, phrases, and metaphors” (p. 5), and provided “a safe space for speaking out and talking back” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 316). I listened critically to the girls’ responses and immersed myself “in the interview, to try to understand the person’s story from her vantage point” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 19). Participants were also given the opportunity to read my analysis of the focus groups and give feedback on my interpretations.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data that was collected and to detect emergent themes, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews repeatedly and transcribed verbatim. In some instances, verbal fillers such as “um,” and “like” were removed from the transcript, only if the removal of the words contributed to the flow and clarity of the participants’ response. Using grounded theory, themes were developed by continuously grouping associated concepts until a plausible connection between concepts was established. Data excerpts from the focus group discussions were selected and interpreted to support my analysis and were discussed in relation to prior research findings and themes.

According to Charmaz (2005), grounded theory includes methods of data analyses that consist of comparative, inductive, and interactive approaches to inquiry that result in an “analytic interpretation of participants’ worlds and of the processes constituting how these worlds are constructed” (p. 508). As described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory lies within the constructivist system. It is subjectivist in epistemology, relativist in ontology, and recognizes the interactive nature of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2005). Grounded theory is compatible with feminist research because issues of gender, class, power, and race can be given central roles in the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2000). Grounded theory is useful for gender-related studies due to its focus on discovering how inequalities concerning hierarchy, status, and rights “are played out at interactional and organizational levels” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 512). Rather than relying on the traditional practices of validity, reliability, and generalizability, which assume that knowledge reflects reality (Kvale, 1995), researchers who use grounded

theory method are not “concerned about the ‘truth’ of their research product but rather the pragmatic applicability of the results” (Annells, 1996, p. 391), and the socially constructed validity of the knowledge (Kvale, 1995). As Charmaz (2005) suggests, grounded theorists simultaneously collect and analyze data throughout the research process in order to uncover the hidden effects of inequality that emerge in the many experiences and stories of research participants and to “anchor agendas for future action, practice, and policies” (p. 512). Thus, grounded theory resonates with feminist post-structuralist concerns about research being useful for the people whose stories are heard and whose narratives of their experiences may challenge prevailing assumptions (Fine, 1992; Flax, 1995; Foster, 1996; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001).

A particular challenge inherent in the grounded theory method is to avoid constructing categories, concepts, and theories that neatly fit a researcher’s pre-existing conceptual framework but may not adequately represent the participants’ views (Dey, 1999; Fine, 1992; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Reinharz, 1992). Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintain that the emergence of categories, concepts, and theories can be enriched, however, by the relationship that exists between the data and the questions brought to it by the researcher, as the researcher strives to “keep respondents’ voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognizing her role in shaping the research process and product” (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 119). Thus, as researcher, I acknowledged my perspectives as I gathered and analyzed the data. Through thorough, reflective, comparative, and repetitive analyses of data, I could be fair, call my preconceptions into question, and take a critical stance toward data. Through this repetitive process, I was able to compare material obtained from each interview that both

validated or invalidated the findings. I was also able to identify words or phrases that required clarification and definition from the participants to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings.

According to Charmaz (2005) coding data is active and immediate and focuses on seeing processes, defining action, and studying materials closely so that researchers “can define both new leads from [the data] and gaps in [the data]” (p. 517). Overall, the goals of coding are to “identify the range and salience of key items and concepts, discover the relationships among these items and concepts, and build and test models linking these concepts together” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 274). By attending to girls’ stories, I was able to understand how they made sense of, understood, and resisted contemporary ideals of femininity and what role the hidden curriculum played in achieving their educational goals and ambitions. A feminist post-structuralist framework and grounded theory method used throughout the analysis and coding of the data required that I reflect on how power dynamics affect research interactions and processes of establishing rapport and trust (per Ellsworth, 1989; Thorne, 1993) and be conscious of how I represented the feelings, experiences, behaviours, and perceptions of the research participants (per Luttrell, 2000). As McRobbie (1994) notes, it is important to take the comments of young people seriously, to recognize their comments as complex social constructs that can be written in advance as scripts made available by dominant culture for their youthful speakers.

In summary, the data gathered through focus groups and photo-elicitation provided access to the perspectives of tween girls by learning from them, in their own words, and through their experiences, how the media affects their education, specifically

the hidden curriculum that is informed by normative gender expectations and stereotypes that are magnified and perpetuated in pop culture media. Through a feminist post-structuralist framework and grounded theory method, I was able to thoughtfully and meaningfully analyze the data, increase the reliability and accuracy of the data collected, and ensure that the data was both credible and useful to the girls, themselves.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

In this chapter, I analyze and interpret the data collected from three focus group discussions that examine how media content effects girls' educational experiences. Using grounded theory, each focus group was analyzed and conceptualized as an on-going process, thus, although themes from different parts of the analysis are interrelated, each was viewed within one category. Themes are presented in chronological order as they surface in the focus group; each theme addresses one or more of the research questions. I chose to present the findings in this order to provide a collective picture of the girls' voices and experiences and to analyze how the girls conceptualized media content and its relation to the hidden curriculum. It is through a dual poststructuralist and feminist lens that I describe, analyze, and interpret the girls' voices, stories, and experiences. Feminist post-structural theory, when applied to the data from this research, emphasizes the various and contradictory discourses on femininity operating within schooling and acknowledges that possibilities for girls are both limited by dominant, but also variable, conceptions of femaleness, as girls are diversely positioned within the school climate (Walkerdine, 1981). A feminist post-structural lens has been useful in the analysis of this research because it recognizes discourses that naturalize femininity and aids in understanding the diversity of each girls' responses, recognizing how they individually and collectively contest, resist, and negotiate their gender identities and gender representations.

To recapitulate, three peer group interview sessions were conducted with girls' 8-10 years old and three separate peer group interviews with girls' 11-14 years old at the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay. Eight girls between the age of 8 and 10 returned

their signed parental and participant consent forms and were able to participate in the focus groups. No girls between 11 and 14 returned the consent forms so the planned focus groups for that age were not organized or conducted. The data collected reflects the voices, stories, and experiences of those eight participants. To maintain and ensure the girls' confidentiality, the participants chose pseudonyms. All of the names of the girls have been changed to their selected pseudonym and the data has been catalogued by the pseudonym.

To begin this chapter, I explore girls' highly critical reflections and interpretations of popular media images. The second section examines the emergent themes and provides concrete examples from the interviews. The findings of the focus group discussions are organized into four major themes. First, the topic of girls who "have it all" is discussed with an emphasis the themes of 'natural' beauty, the 'perfect' body, and academic success. The second section examines gender socialization in education namely: gendered expectations, gendered roles, and teacher treatment. The third section explores the discomfort girls experience at school including sexual harassment, bullying, and teacher intervention. The fourth section focuses on girls' methods of resistance to gender roles and gender expectations, which include the collective and independent use of voice, being true to one's self, and girls' insightful strategies to improve the school climate.

An Introduction to Girls' Perspectives on the Media: "All artists kind of look like Barbie dolls"

As the girls arrived and entered into the designated classroom, they were greeted and encouraged to serve themselves pizza and orange juice prior to organizing

themselves around a square table where photographs of popular female celebrities were laid out. Through discussions during the “On the Move” program, I became increasingly aware of which celebrities in particular were of interest to those tween girls and chose images from popular tween magazines and websites, accordingly. The following discussion illustrates the girls’ conceptions of gendered constructions, social norms, and media influences.

The girls immediately and spontaneously began to comment on the images. As the girls began to examine the images of popular female celebrities, I asked them to think about what they liked or disliked about the images. Erin, a 9-year-old, immediately pointed to a picture of Miley Cyrus and said with a certain air of disdain “Ugly-I don’t like her haircut and look at what she’s doing (referring to Miley Cyrus sticking out her tongue) and her hair oh my goodness that’s bad. Amy replied, “[her hair] is just bad, like Miley Cyrus just looks ugly completely.” Expressed with a mixture of disgust and scorn, Erin’s comments not only imply that she was engaged in popular culture discourse, but that she was aware that hair is a valued female sexual attribute. Other exchanges, such as when the girls’ reminisced about “old-school Miley,” denote a pattern in relation to beauty ideals and heteronormative femininity. The girls agreed that having “long hair” again “dressing properly” and reverting back to “old school Miley when she’s younger and she looks pretty” would help her to regain positive role model status. The girls’ responses corroborate Northup and Lieber’s (2010) findings that classic beauty and femininity, which can be described, as a female who is fashionable, does not heavily accessorize, has long hair and a “soft image” (p. 270) are most ideal. “Old school Miley,” according to the girls’ comments, fit the category of classic beauty and femininity.

However, because Miley cut her hair short, dresses provocatively, is constantly over-accessorized and no longer has a “soft image” she represents the converse – a lack of beauty, which Northup and Lieber (2010, p. 270), argue, removes Miley from fitting within the category of heteronormative femininity, as she no longer appeals to the gaze of many straight males.

The girls in the focus group revealed their familiarity with images of conventional female beauty and the rules that sanction the centrality of physical appearance for girls, but also how vital innocence is in maintaining a proper preadolescent female identity. As many cultural feminists (Garratt, 1990; Lewis, 1990; McRobbie, 1991) note, popular culture plays an important role in shaping female identity, which indicates that the girls were not only critical of Miley’s overt transgression of beauty norms and resistance to the disciplines and sanctions of heteronormative femininity (Hollander & Einwohner, 2001), but they were also aware of the cultural pressure to maintain a certain standard of beauty and purity.

Referring to an image of Miley Cyrus sticking out her tongue, Erin then rhetorically asked the group, “Have you seen the music video to ‘Wrecking Ball’? Ugh ewe, she is ruining her life. See this? She’s ruining it!” Taylor agreed, “Miley Cyrus, she has a bad life.” I encouraged the girls to contemplate why they thought the music video was bad. Coco replied exclaiming, “she’s naked on a wrecking ball, little kids could be watching!” However, she was quick to add that the video “doesn’t show her private parts.” The entire group nodded in agreement as Louise explained why she thought the video to “Wrecking Ball” was troublesome:

Because, if you see that from someone who is so good, Miley Cyrus, she used to be so good and everything, she used to be all nice and make songs about stuff that's good but now there's Miley Cyrus and she's doing horrible things and if she was a role model or still is a role model to other kids who watch her stuff, like I used to watch her stuff and I still do, I used to watch her show, it was Hannah Montana for life or whatever it was and now she's here doing inappropriate things and she's telling lies, she's doing drugs, she's doing all these horrible things and if she's a role model and she's taking off her clothes on a wrecking ball and licking hammers then she's teaching kids to do that!

Louise's comment challenges Tolman's (2012a, 2012b) theory that the bombardment of media images may influence girls to conform to commercialized conceptions of sexiness. Instead, the girls in the focus group not only critically engaged with and actively criticized Miley Cyrus' appearance and behaviour, they also revealed their concern for and protection of younger girls from sexual innuendos. Similar to Buckingham, Willet, Braggs, Russell, and Dorrer's (2010) report on the sexualisation of young people, the girls in the focus group did not consider the implications of sexualisation a threat to themselves, but rather, a threat to girls younger than themselves. The girls' comments reveal that they locate themselves differently than "kids" and understand that they inhabit a particular space that is "beyond that of the girl-child or the adolescent girl" (Walsh, 2005, p. 188). The girls in the focus group are, as Walsh (2005) describes, 'outsider' tweens; tweens who occupy a space, image and ideal that is very much their own.

Although the girls' responses could be seen as subversive, they were also coherent with stereotypical sexual double standards that condemn women's active sexuality. The following discussion illustrates girls' contradictory narratives about 'good' versus 'bad' female sexuality and behaviour. "Katy Perry's amazing actually she's a really good influence-she doesn't show most of her body," Louise said. Amy disagreed accordingly, "Well, its kind of bad but [not] compared to Miley Cyrus." Amy felt that Miley Cyrus was perhaps overly or provocatively sexual because she dared to be naked on television in comparison to Katy Perry's subtly sexual behaviour. Amy and Louise's reaction to popular media images mirror the current sexualisation discourse that demonizes girls labeled as too sexual and fetishizes girls labeled as 'innocent' (Egan, 2013). As Egan astutely notes, sexualisation has become an individual problem rather than a cultural one, "reducing it to a problem of sexual behaviours and sexuality rather than sexism" (Egan, 2013, p. 267). Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry represent the virgin/whore dichotomy as the girls drew a fine line of assumptions to navigate the space between innocent and promiscuous, sexy and slutty, assertive and aggressive (Ringrose, 2013). According to Kilbourne (2000), the media offer contradictory images to girls, asking them simultaneously to appear innocent and seductive, virginal and experienced. Impossible to obtain and littered with sexual mores and sexual double standards, girls are caught between contradictory narratives about proper female sexual behavior.

I asked the girls, "Why do you think Miley Cyrus chose to be naked in her video?" Louise responded, "I have no idea because I think she, I think that she is like thinking that like if she does all this stuff then people love her more." It seems it is easier for Louise to accept that Miley Cyrus is performing a particular sexual script that is, as

Foucault (1979) and Bartky (1998) describe, culturally constrained by a perceived gaze and is thus subject to shame and judgment, rather than to fathom that Miley Cyrus is a sexual agent with full control over her body and her sexual desires. As Bentley (1999) notes, girls feel that their, “value is measured by physical attention” (p. 211), and, instead of being perceived as active agents in their lives, they are often perceived as objects of the gaze and are stripped of the relative freedom to ‘be who they want to be.’ Within this framework, Louise demonstrated a clear awareness and understanding of the inherent paradox of sexiness. To be a girl, is not only a subjective experience of identity, but is also circumscribed and fuelled by external prescriptions.

Louise also voiced discomfort about ‘all’ celebrities’ appearances. She said, “I don’t know why but I think that all artists kind of look like Barbie dolls because they all try to make themselves look so perfect that they look like Barbie Dolls.” Coco added, “And so pretty and plastic.” I asked the girls whether people who look like Barbies are considered less smart. “Well, not necessarily” Louise responded. However, when I asked the girls “Do you think that other people might think they’re not smart?” All nine girls nodded ‘yes.’ Louise explained:

A lot of people don’t think they’re smart. According to Ariana Grande’s show [singer-songwriter and actress from the hit Nickelodeon show *Sam & Cat*] she’s really dumb but I know she really isn’t. She has fun playing her role as being Kat on her shows. She has fun doing it and she does have an education or else she wouldn’t even be an actor.

Myra expressed a similar sentiment, “Yes her character is silly and pretends; she acts being silly but that’s just a funny character, it’s probably my favorite character. I love her character she’s funny.” I asked the girls to explain how it makes them feel that girls are often seen as less intelligent in the media. Katniss felt “bad because people say that

[Ariana Grande's] actually dumb." Courtney agreed, "I feel bad for her because everybody thinks she's like stupid." Although some scholars (such as Levy, 2005; Kobrin, 2006), have argued that girls react mostly to external cues, the girls in the focus group demonstrated a sophisticated ability to critically engage with media outlets to successfully challenge the familiar polarization of beauty and intelligence. They also understood how powerful media can be in defining and shaping, in a very narrow way, what girlhood looks like. Similar to Baudrillard's (1983) findings, the girls' comments reveal how increasingly difficult it can be to distinguish between what is real and the simulation of reality proposed by the media.

Although girls are subject to sexualised and heteronormative images in popular culture, multiple qualitative studies have shown that the way girls make meaning from media is not linear or determinist (Jackson & Vares, 2011; Mulholland, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Gill, 2009; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). This research is no different; girls' stories involve "a complex brew of pleasure, resistance, complicity, pressure, banality, confusion, disgust, curiosity and refusal" (Egan, 2013, p. 268). Hearing the stories of these nine girls has begun to highlight how they simultaneously resist and conform to normative standards of tween gender performance, and are positioned by beauty discourses in a formal and informal schooling setting. The girls' responses illuminate how normative standards of female identities are continuously shaped and negotiated as they are contingent on broader contexts and thus, malleable.

Focus Groups with Girls

The Girls Who "Have it All"

Girls' relationships with the competing demands of academic success and socially-prescribed femininity is explored in this section, specifically, how girls negotiate, disrupt, and/ or embody the precarious balancing act between heteronormative femininity and academic excellence in school. The group of eight participants, 8 - 10 years old, took up a range of identities. All of the participants defined themselves as female. They all attended English schools and spoke English as a first language. Six of the eight participants were enrolled in public schooling within a community of predominantly middle-class socioeconomic status. Courtney is the only participant whose schooling community might be labeled as socially disadvantaged or "ghetto" as the girls in the focus group often referred to it. Amy was home-schooled. All eight girls came from low-income neighborhoods and lived in close proximity to the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay. Myra, Amy, Louise, Courtney, Erin and Taylor were White; and Coco and Katniss of Aboriginal descent.

All eight participants were respectful and eager to participate in each focus group. Some of the participants were quiet and shy while others dominated discussion and took centre-stage throughout the sessions by causing laughter or breaking out in dancing and changing seats. Although at times the focus groups were chaotic as the participants often talked over each other and at times ignored my questions, it did not seem connected to a lack of interest in participation. Rather, it seemed the girls had a pressing need to share their thoughts. It was made clear to the participants, before and during the sessions, that they could choose to leave the focus group at any time and that participation was voluntary throughout, still, they chose to stay, participated, and returned for the subsequent sessions.

Although the girls came from different backgrounds, they did collaboratively share in feelings of pressure to conform to normative cultural representations of successful girlhood. To be a successful girl, you have to “have it all!” Amy declared; “perfect” bodies, “natural” beauty, fashionable clothing, the newest electronics and high academic achievement were listed as the most pervasive identifiers of social status. The group’s articulations of girls who “have it all” echoes what Rimer (2007) refers to as the “super girl phenomenon” a trend that Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2007) argue requires girls to “balance contradictory subjectivities with ease” (p. 7). The high achieving and successful girls of today have also been referred to as “alpha girls” (Kindlon, 2006), and “amazing girls” (Rimer, 2007). Regardless of the term used to describe girls who “have it all”, there are some definitional consistencies across studies, such as high academic achievement, leadership, attractiveness, and involvement in multiple, age-appropriate roles (Callahan et al., 1994; Girls Inc, 2007; Kindlon, 2006; Rimer, 2008). My reading of the current literature suggests that the super girl phenomenon, is a new “dilemma” that requires girls “to be everything to everyone all of the time” (Girls Inc, 2006, p. 3). As Skelton and Francis (2003) suggest, embodying excellence and achieving normative standards of femininity continue to involve a precarious balancing act for many primary school girls. The following sub-sections aim to address and explore the tensions and contradictions of “having it all.” Building on a body of research that problematizes the construction of femininity and girls’ experiences of school achievement (see, for example, Reay, 2001; Renold, 2001; Skelton & Francis, 2002, 2003; Walkerdine, 1990; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) I will focus on the possibilities, consequences, and transgressions of preadolescent girls gendered subjectivities.

Natural beauty

Performing and embodying normative femininity is a valued trait for girls who “have it all,” particularly their ability to appear beautiful naturally and with little effort. Girls who “try to look like actual dolls and put on loads of make-up” look “silly” and would not be popular, Louise explicated. The girls were clear to differentiate that “trying too hard” was unacceptable and to be authentic meant using make-up “responsibly” to avoid looking “fake.” According to Labre and Walsh-Childers (2003), achieving beauty is “a goal the media portray as not only possible but necessary for the achievement of self-satisfaction, popularity, and success” (p. 379). With the exception of “birthdays,” “graduation” and “special occasions” and for the purpose of completing an outfit, many of the girls were hesitant to admit that they invested a great deal of time into their appearance. Perhaps they felt constrained by the cultural myth that those who are not graced with “natural” beauty need to work harder on their appearance. The girls did, however, demonstrate a rather advanced understanding of the cultural implications and significance of wearing make-up. They agreed that make-up was used to look “nice,” “special” and “pretty,” to gain “attention,” and “popularity” and “to get a boyfriend,” because girls know that “they’re like really popular” when they “get the boys.” Despite the lure of male attention and popularity, the girls were able to make sense of and resist the implication that they were inherently not good enough naturally and need the use of artifice to look beautiful. The girls agreed that, “it’s prettier to be yourself.”

While the girls did demonstrate agency regarding their use of makeup, it was curtailed by structural constraints within the school, and larger media messages about appropriate female behaviours (Dellinger and Williams 1997). For instance, unlike many

of her peers in the focus group, Katniss identified as a tomboy and felt pressured to engage in “girly” or heteronormative femininities:

My friend always makes me wear make up when I go out with her, she makes me wear these clothes that don't have like straps, and heels and I really don't like that. Just because I'm a tomboy doesn't mean I want to change.

Katniss was invested in her alternative identity as ‘tomboy,’ separating herself from the embodied norms of heteronormative femininity. She was openly interested in sports, and “hanging out with boys,” and thought that wearing make-up was “silly.” When asked if she ever refused to wear make-up, Katniss spoke very emotionally: “When I say I don't want to wear make-up [my friend] pushes me down and sits on me and forces me.” Katniss admitted that she struggled to maintain her authenticity while maintaining close friendships in an elementary school environment. Although reluctant to conform to a heteronormative female appearance, Katniss, at age 10, was well aware of the consequences of non-conformity. Girls who do not display their beauty as a public performance are stigmatized and at risk of being “bullied,” “beaten up,” or called “ugly.” As Coco explained, “girls are made fun of for how they look.” To avoid being bullied, Katniss would wear make-up sometimes, but would “wipe it off” as soon as the school day was finished. By subscribing to the image of heteronormative femininity, she learned to negotiate her gendered performance to maintain safety and acceptance within the confines of school. Heteronormative femininity plays an important role in shaping girls’ feelings about girlhood in general and beauty in particular. The definition of heteronormative femininity deems beauty part of the standard, pressuring girls to both struggle, resist and embrace stereotypes of femininity.

From this perspective, Katniss can be seen as neither manipulated nor free from

prescribed meanings but rather engaged in a daily process of social negotiation as she rejected the notion that girls are passive victims who internalize messages and meanings conveyed by popular culture (see Buckingham, 2000; Steinberg & Kinchloe, 1997; Storey, 2003). Rather, Katniss' story explicates that girls are able to "locate themselves flexibly and strategically within particular social contexts" (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 138). Nevertheless, girls' participation in popular culture is never easy or unproblematic. They unavoidably face "the dominant understandings of the world," which become the site of personal struggle and negotiation (Storey, 2003, p. 52). As Louise explained:

A lot of my friends they don't try to be themselves, they try to be someone they're not supposed to be because they're insecure about themselves, because they're either pushed around or made fun of and they just can't take it anymore so they try to be someone else and they just like go and be one of these people (points to images of celebrities). You try hard not to listen, but it's hard to keep people out of your head.

The overwhelming majority of responses articulated by the girls in the focus group revealed a constant search for identity, and exposed a struggle within the lived girl-culture between the ideal and authentic and media and personal. As Amy further explained, "[Girls] try to be these celebrities, and then they think they're prettier than you so you try to act like [celebrities] too but it's hard at the same time because you want to be yourself-it's just hard." Based on their responses, trying to be "themselves" rather than a self proposed by media and cultural expectations is a gesture of authenticity. However, the responses also revealed the important role that girls' collaborative discussion plays in exposing the dominant ideas about and cultural stereotypes of gender, as well as the strong potential to transform and subvert these stereotypes through peer interaction.

The 'perfect' body

A powerful element that girls who “have it all” possess is the ‘perfect’ body that appears attainable, healthy, and fit. Although the participants describe the ideal female body as healthy, the image of the ideal body that is portrayed in the media, particularly in fitness magazines, requires that the body not only be healthy, but thin as well. As many studies (see Markula, 1995; Blood, 2005; Bartky 1998) have found, the promotion of fitness and health extends to the thin body ideal, and has increased disordered eating over the past two decades (Blood, 2005; Markula, 2001; Thompson, 1990). Certainly, health and fitness are conflated with thinness, as the healthy body tends to be visualized by the thin body. To delve into the girls’ complex negotiations of ‘normal’ and ‘abject’ (Butler, 1990; 1993) female bodies, I asked them to explain the discourse on body image in school. Katniss explained that teachers often encouraged girls not to “change the way you are” and to “look the way that you want to.” It was widely understood among the girls that a multiplicity of bodies of any size or shape was acceptable and that no body was inadequate or inferior. However, the scope of normalcy as illustrated by the media is narrow and the slightest variation in weight is considered unacceptable and rendered as the ‘other’ according to popular discourse among their peers at school. As Courtney explained, “most people make fun of people that are fat-my friend’s kind of heavy so then she wanted to be in cheerleading but then everybody picked on her.” Erin added, bullies “also called girls the B word.” Katniss recounted multiple incidents when she felt humiliated because she was bad at “running lines in gym,” and was called a “fat ho.” Similar to Bondy’s (2009) argument, the influence of popular media, in particular rap and hip-hop, has fostered the use of words such as ho and bitch to become normalized amongst females in dialogue. As Stephens and Few (2007) contend, preadolescent girls

not only recognize and use these scripts but consume them on a regular basis. So, while the girls could re-articulate the teachers' messages about the acceptability of multiple body sizes and understood the messages' value, it did little to actually undercut the dominant media image that associated slenderness with beauty and success.

The construction of 'normal' bodies is complex and is becoming even more difficult for girls to navigate. As Myra explained, although teachers and parents stressed that it was important to feel and to be healthy, to avoid ridicule and to gain popularity girls have to "become very skinny to be better" even if it means "puking out your food and not eating." Shilling's (1993) conception that the body is an unfinished product, that is in constant need of work, appeared clearly as the girls expressed a desire to obtain a body that balanced the line between 'fat' and 'thin.' As Courtney explained, "girls don't want to be fat or too skinny, they want to just be perfect." Through the dichotomous narrative of the 'fat' body and the 'thin' body, girls have become equally concerned with attaining a body that is perfect and manages to balance the line between 'fat' and 'thin' and is seemingly attainable because it is healthy, realistic, and natural.

The girls in the focus group also disclosed their awareness of anorexia and the politics of media culture, which constructs thinness as simultaneously pleasurable and critically scrutinized. Myra felt obliged to justify her tiny frame by saying, "I eat lots because I know it's good for me and food is there for a reason and some people can't find food very easily and I'm just really skinny still, I get taller instead of bigger." Although hyper-thinness was vital to the achievement of high-status in school, the group was mostly critical of efforts to achieve it, as anorexia was equated with "trying way too hard." The girls' stories exemplify that natural thinness and natural beauty are both part of the

definition of girls who “have it all.” Girls are held to standards that are impossible to meet; nevertheless, they are criticized for never having the “perfect” body and never being beautiful enough, while also criticized for attempting to meet these standards of perfection.

The girls’ stories highlight the conflict of competing discourses they were caught between; parents and teachers tell girls that anorexia is unhealthy, and the media warns the public about the increase in children’s body weight dissatisfaction, while simultaneously promoting the thin ideal. As Driscoll (2013) notes, “girl culture both admits contradictions and assigns girls the authority to negotiate them” (p. 292), as “girls fight to listen to how their bodies feel from the inside while critically examining the influence and impact of outside attention, compliments, harassment and ‘choice’” (Edell, Brown, & Tolman, 2013, p. 276). Paradoxically, the girls were highly critical of efforts to be thin but also admired the popularity and status that being thin coveted.

The girls were able to locate the fundamental dichotomy between the idealized female bodies produced by the media and the actual, diverse appearances of girls (Carson, 2001). While positioning the former as artificial, they viewed the latter as real and criticized some girls’ attempts to attain the superficial thin body. This understanding implies a constant struggle that the girls in the focus group were experiencing in a school environment dominated by mediated texts of idealized female bodies.

The pressures of the thin, idealized body are likely to become more obvious during their adolescent years when the desire to gain control of their bodies will heighten (as theorized by Wendell, 1996, p. 91) and the homogenizing aesthetic power of the normalized body will continue to pressure girls to control and alter their appearance. As

Myra eloquently explained, “little girls don’t care what they wear, they don’t care what they look like, they just be silly and that’s normally what little girls are like [but] lots of girls [change] in high school [because] they feel lots of pressure.” The girls’ stories and experiences emphasize how vital it is to include and expand the range of media literacy that is being taught in schools. By gaining media-literacy skills and becoming more aware of how media influences girls’ everyday educational experiences, teachers may be able to more effectively disseminate information that bridge the gap between the media, education and the hidden curriculum (Harris, 1994; Kellner, 1998) in order to better assist girls to critically and analytically negotiate and mediate their schools social world.

Academic success

In addition to beauty and bodily perfection, intelligence was deemed a quality that the girls who “have it all” embody. Within the framework of intelligence, “emphasized femininity” (Connell, 1987, p. 183) was a required trait that would exempt girls from being relegated to ‘nerd’ status. Amy explained, “it’s hard because people get made fun if they’re a nerd and like ugly.” Girls who “have it all” must also maintain a difficult balance between beauty, their academic success and being stigmatized as ‘over-achievers’ because “to do otherwise is to risk social isolation” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 557). In opposition to Pomerantz and Raby’s (2011) work, most of the girls in this study had difficulty managing good grades, while also being seen as ‘pretty,’ and as a result, often “get made fun of because they don’t look as good as [popular girls] or they’re not as good [at school] as they are,” explained Amy.

The different experiences of intelligence that exist within the school’s social world were discussed in the focus groups. Katniss, Courtney, Louise, and Myra cited

receiving “money,” “expensive stuff” “jobs” “pleasing parents” and “being smart” as their motivation for success in school. The girls did not equate “hard work” with success, which, according to Pomerantz and Raby (2011), “may still be a trait that is viewed as ‘un-cool’ in the school,” (p. 555). However, they did agree that “having fun” “trying your best” and “taking risks” gave them a sense of achievement and pride in their work.

Interestingly, these feelings of achievement and pride were contradicted by the embarrassment they felt in class. For instance, five out of the eight girls in the focus group had been targets of bullying inside the classroom and often felt “scared” “embarrassed” and “freaked out” when asked to participate or share their work in math class because they were often subject to, “dirty looks,” “taunting,” being “bullied” or called “stupid” or “dumb,” if they answered a question incorrectly. Louise admitted that, “people make fun of you, like oh you got this wrong and they’re going to taunt you for the rest of your life.” Katniss shared a similar story, “if I just get a math question wrong some of the girls just give me dirty looks.” The girls in the focus group discussed that those deemed less intelligent than the girls “who have it all” often become targets of repeated allegations of being “stupid.”

The girls’ stories illustrate a tension that exists between academic performance and social status; girls must maintain a balance between beauty and academic success and must appear smart, but not too smart in order to achieve and maintain popularity. The girls understood that they had to appear intelligent, with effortless ease as to avoid being called “nerds,” while simultaneously attaining academic accomplishments that were not inferior to the girls who “have it all.” The girls in the focus group expressed deep anxieties about standards of intelligence that undermined their academic performance and

inhibited their ability to express their full academic and intellectual potential. However, they also learned to balance academic success with their fear of being bullied. To protect themselves from ridicule, the girls pretended that they did not know the answer, did not raise their hand, and/ or pretended that their work was incomplete. As Myra admitted, “Sometimes I don’t finish my work completely and I don’t put my hand up.” Similar to Renold and Allen’s (2006) study, the girls found themselves hiding, downplaying, and silencing their successes and achievements at school (Ali, 2003; Renold 2001, 2005).

Girlhood discourses within the confines of school determine and describe how girls at all levels of intelligence are perceived, and the level of negotiation that is necessary to maintain “a polished gender performance that engages fluently in the citation of dominant gender norms” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011, p. 577). The complex negotiations in which girls engage around their academic identities echo many feminist scholars’ critique that the post- feminist representation of academically successful girls is far less simplistic than popular discourse suggests (see Gonick 2003, 2005; Renold 2001; Renold & Allen 2006; Ringrose 2007; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody 2001). The girls’ stories exemplify how difficult it is to navigate academic success in school without sacrifice (see Rimer, 2007). Narrow, constricting, and rather dangerous constructions of girlhood must be transcended, so that all girls can obtain equal access to safe schooling and enjoy the possibility of academic success or failure.

Preadolescent Girls Classroom Culture

Preadolescent girls appear to be negatively affected by the prevailing explicit gender stereotypes to which they are exposed at school and through the media. To explore how girls derive meaning from peer and teacher interactions further, I turn the

discussion to girls' awareness of math gender stereotypes. For many years, educators and researchers have investigated female students in mathematics (see, for instance, Benbow & Stanley, 1980, 1983; Boaler, 2002; Burton, 1995; EQAO, 2008; Hall, 2012 Reyes & Stanic, 1988; Morrow & Morrow, 1995; Tartre & Fennema, 1995; Sherman, 1982; Lesko & Corpus, 2006; Ryckman & Peckham, 1987). What this study has identified is that, although recent evidence reveals that the gender gap in math skills has narrowed, or perhaps disappeared (Else-Quest, Hyde, & Linn, 2010; Hyde, Lindberg, Linn, Ellis, & Williams, 2008), teachers, peers and media, continue to perpetuate stereotypes with regard to female students' mathematics abilities. Even if girls do not believe they are affected, its existence as a dominant discourse has framed how girls understand and think about mathematics as a field (Blanton, Christie, & Dye, 2002); as current research suggests, despite girls' math achievements, girls' interest in math seems to decline during adolescence (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002; Haussler & Hoffman, 2002; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). To understand more about preadolescent girls' experiences and interactions with peers and teachers in mathematics, I focus on how girls understand, internalize and deal with math anxiety, math ability bias and gender equity issues inside the classroom.

Confidence and interest in math: "I'm not smart and I'm not good at math"

Stereotypes in school and in the media about girls mathematical abilities spread the message that boys are better at mathematics than girls (Aronson, 2010 in AAUW, 2010), girls lack self-confidence (Greenberg-Lakes, 1990), have math anxiety (Tobias, 1993), and math ability is something innate and unchangeable. The girls in the focus group were influenced by this discourse, as illustrated by its frequency in their narratives.

In particular, the group of girls indicated that they lost confidence, had a tendency to underestimate their own math ability, and assumed that they did not possess the skills necessary to be successful in mathematics. As Katniss lamented, “I’m not smart and I’m not good at math.” “Ugh, I hate math!” Louise exclaimed in consolidation with Katniss. “I was just going to say that!” Amy and Coco simultaneously replied. “Why do you hate math?” I asked. “It’s hard,” Coco blatantly stated, and “stressful,” exclaimed Myra and Courtney. Six of the eight girls reported low levels of confidence in their math ability, and a lack of success in the majority of their math coursework. Starting in elementary school, awareness of the gender stereotype that females are intellectually inferior to males in math can result in decreased math achievement and performance (Neuville & Croizet, 2007), low self-confidence, a decrease in participation and a lack of interest in mathematics (Huguet & Regner, 2009; Nosek & Smyth, 2009; Nosek et al., 2007).

The girls collectively agreed that their interactions with male peers inside the classroom played a crucial role in the negative development of their interest and success in math. Girls’ negative male peer interactions activated the stereotype that girls are inherently inferior to males in math (Good et al., 2003) and amplified girls’ insecurities. As Courtney explicated, “I get embarrassed when I get the answer wrong because guys laugh at you.” Katniss added, “I didn’t get a math question right and a boy in my class said that I was dumb.” According to Courtney and Katniss, boys tended to perpetuate negative, media generated stereotypes about girls’ perceived lack of competence in math. Although the girls tried not to “listen to them,” boys’ comments, similar to Leaper and Brown’s (2010) study, influenced girls to feel less confident in their math abilities and feel “stressed” inside the mathematics classroom. According to Aronson (2010), long-

term and repeated stereotypes about girls' academic abilities can undermine girls' mathematical aspirations, and cause them to dis-identify with math as a field of study as "to avoid the risk of being judged by a stereotype" (AAUW, 2010, p. 41). Results from this study indicate that girls are negatively affected by prevailing and explicit gender stereotypes as they connect to girls' feelings of anxiety, stress and dread in math class, particularly when they do not know the right answer, or answer a question incorrectly.

Further, negative gender stereotypes can also lead to inaccurate self-assessment of girls' own ability. As the AAUW (2010) reports, "girls assess their mathematical abilities lower than do boys with similar mathematical achievements" and "hold themselves to a higher standard than boys do in subjects like math" (p. xv). This is consistent with the findings in this study. Louise provided a poignant example of this phenomenon: "There's guys in my math class who say they know everything but I find the girls in my class, they just think of their honest own self." "Yeah," Katniss said, "Boys in my math class think they're so good at everything!" The girls in the focus group also established that "boys think that everything's a challenge," and that boys were consistently more competitive in regards to educational success than were girls. As Katniss explicated, "This guy in my class, it's all about competition because he thinks he can win at anything." This finding is consistent with Burton's (1995) study on the dominant style of communication that is accepted in mathematics, which is characterized as highly confrontational, competitive, and argumentative. By encouraging students to learn in a competitive manner, females are disadvantaged inside the classroom (AAUW, 1994). If girls are socialized to be more cooperative and they find mathematics to be extremely competitive, they will be less likely to invest in math as it implicitly associated with stereotypes of masculinity. The

girls' experiences suggest that classroom learning environments are where gendered media stereotypes are activated and play a crucial role in the development of elementary school girls' interest and future success in math (Plant et al., 2009).

Although stereotypes that concern mathematical abilities serve to reinforce the valuing of mathematics and male superiority simultaneously, the girls were able to disengage from the alienating assumption that females are inherently less intelligent than males in mathematics. As Louise explained, "boys are like the same as girls, as in like brain wise." Courtney continued, "Most people are at the same strength in our classroom so it's not really competition, even if it was really a competition." Despite girls' perceived males as inherently better than females in mathematics (National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, 2002), the girls in this study did not seem to internalize the dominant math ability discourse that boys are better at it than girls. While the girls agreed that they did not perceive a difference in intellectual ability, they did perceive sexism that exists within mathematics discourses that affected their confidence in ability (Tartre & Fennema, 1995). As Blanton, Christie, and Dye (2002), suggest even when girls verbally reject these negative gender stereotypes, they continue to internalize them to some degree, regardless.

Gender socialization in education: "Act like a lady!"

According to Lynch, Leder, and Forgasz, (2001) many approaches to educational reform in mathematics are flawed and encourage the view that the formal barriers against participating in mathematics have been removed and the blame for girls' absence from mathematics has shifted to the girls themselves. With this logic, math is accessible and if girls would only overcome their fears, they could achieve academic success (Damarin,

2000). This theory does not take into account the constant media and cultural messages that continue to dictate what it means to a girl. Girls are continuously sent messages about females being submissive, cooperative and less competitive than males. The girls in the focus group collectively felt discouraged from participating more aggressively than boys in class, as they were praised for being quiet and passive, and scorned when they did not “act like a lady.” The girls also described themselves as more serious, docile, quiet and attentive, in comparison to boys. As Louise explained, “girls are really calm and boys are really AH!” According to the participants, girls also got in trouble for different things than boys, such as “talking,” “texting,” or “not doing their work.” The Quebec Report on Education (1999) explains that, although “ girls in mixed classrooms speak three times less often than boys, they are perceived [by teachers] as always talking too much,” which relates to the social stereotype of women as gossipy, verbal and talkative (p. 51).

Comparatively, the girls identified boys as dominant in math class, in part with teacher’s acquiescence, creating a disincentive effect to girls’ participation. For instance, the girls explicated that they often felt distracted and intimidated by the more aggressive participation of boys in math class and expressed frustration from the lack of attention they received from teachers. Teachers were too busy punishing boys for “always screaming and yelling in class,” to pay attention to the girls. As Coco explained, “they’re annoying when they’re being bad.” Louise added, “Yeah, they get more attention in class because of that.” Needless, to say the girls felt aggravated by disruptive boys who wasted their valuable class time. As Davidson (2002) reports, boys get the attention of teachers by calling out in class and are not corrected or reprimanded for doing so. Thus, while

boys mobilize more of the teachers' attention, girls are often forgotten, which further perpetuates and reinforces the stereotype of disruptive boys and calm girls. The differential treatment of boys and girls in mathematics classrooms may also explain the decline in girls' interest, despite comparable academic achievement.

While the girls in the focus group conformed to gender stereotypic roles and expectations in some instances, they also conveyed stories of struggle, defiance, and resistance. As Louise explained, "I always try to shout out loud and try to be funny but I never can, I keep it to myself, I say it quietly." "Why do you say it quietly?" I asked. "I try, I really do try but I just usually can't. I find it scary. People will be like what is she doing. [Boys] act funny, but they're like that's not cool [when I do]." Louise was frustrated because boys "always" acted "loud" and "funny" and it was perceived as "normal" but when she attempted to do so, she was seen as "strange" and was often judged. Similar to the report on education in Quebec (1999), "causing trouble" or "being a class clown" (p. 53) were seen as common masculine-associated behaviors, while females were expected to pay attention and work quietly. To further reinforce this notion, Katniss explained that, while watching a 2014 Winter Olympics hockey game at school, "I screamed because Canada scored so I screamed and everyone was like, Katniss, what are you doing? So I just sat back down." Although the girls were disappointed that they could not act out at school the way boys did, they reasoned that it was more important to "listen to the rules" and to "listen to other people when they talk" than to be disruptive. Chapmen (2004) suggests that "Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm, whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up" (p. 1). The girls in the focus group, although at times resistant, were aware that they were solely valued for

their “socialization to act in stereotypically feminine ways” (as Hill suggests in Coleman, 1992, p. 71).

Perceptions of teacher bias: “My teacher always picks the boys”

The impact of school culture, however, cannot be overlooked in relation to teachers’ perceived preferential treatment. The girls in the focus group provided insights on gender bias at school, explaining how teachers often treat males preferentially in comparison to female students. Katniss explicated:

Well sometimes in school [my teacher] always picks the boys to do like the really good stuff and the girls to do boring stuff. Like to go help her with something, go help the little kids and other stuff and for the girls sometimes we just have to stay and work. So it gets a little annoying sometimes.

Louise recounted a similar experience:

My teacher picks the boys a lot of the time I don’t know why and the librarian lets the boys go first for the books and the girls end up going last and we get yelled at for taking too long.

The girls noticed a disparity between how boys were treated by teachers in comparison to girls. The girls acknowledged that boys received more attention and praise than them, despite good grades or good behaviour. Although the girls did not speculate why this incongruity existed, they understood that it was unfair and that their differential treatment made the classroom setting much more antagonistic.

In opposition to Myra and Louise’s experiences, Courtney expressed a post-feminist understanding of how teachers treat girls in class by constructing the classroom

“as unfairly tilted in girls’ favor” (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013, p. 191). Courtney explained, “The thing I don’t think that’s fair even though I’m a girl and my teachers a girl, she only picks girls for things like activities to do and not boys and I don’t think that’s fair.” Courtney’s story signified what Harris (2004) conceives as a post-feminist world, where issues of gender inequality are no longer an issue because “girls have attained all the power they could ever want and may actually ‘have too much power’” (Harris, 2004, p. 72), the collective stories and experiences of the girls in the focus group revealed that there is still an abundance of hurdles, such as behavior bias, gender ability bias, and math ability bias that they must grapple with in order to achieve success.

Although the gender gap in math performance is closing (Else-Quest, Hyde, & Linn, 2010; Hyde, Lindberg, Linn, Ellis, & Williams, 2008), negative stereotypes about girls’ math abilities are still widely held (Bhanot & Jovanovic, 2005; Bleeker & Jacobs, 2004). To challenge their perceived deficit in mathematics the girls often retaliated with witty questions and comments that they directed at the over-confident boys in their class. As Louise jokingly remarked, “I’m like, oh so you think you’re good at everything eh? What’s 50 x a million? Bam!” The girls in the focus group were well aware of academic and cultural expectations, yet they were not simply passive victims; they were actively negotiating their own identity formation. For instance, when I asked, “what do you want to be when you’re older?” Courtney stated, “I want to be a scientist and find the cure for cancer,” while Katniss wanted to become a “doctor”, Coco wanted to become a “veterinarian” and Amy wanted to become an “architect”. The next stage of identity formation (adolescence), however, is often the time when many girls begin to show a heightened awareness of gender roles and cultural norms; when the media become more

influential sources of information about gender; and when girls develop more negative attitudes toward school and male dominated fields of study (AAUW, 1998; Akin & Kurbanoglu, 2011; Falco et al., 2010). Thus, it is critical to examine the complexity of tween girlhood, the particular position that tweens occupy and how their sense of self and society affect their identity formation.

The beliefs, interests, and messages that target girls about socially acceptable behaviors are established in elementary school and reinforced through high school, and can influence course selection in future years (Frehill, 1997; Lackland & De Lisi, 2001), further shaping their career choices. If girls start to opt out of math during high school, it may prevent them from accessing dreams, goals, and ambitions to “cure cancer” that they might have had when they were younger, and to become “architects,” “doctors,” and “veterinarians.” Thus, educators must further identify solutions that support and encourage girls to study math in a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment.

Sexual Harassment and Discomfort at School: “I don’t like it when boys touch me”

Sexual harassment and sexual violence have become more prominent in high school (AAUW 2008), though girls as young as eight and nine years of age have also reported being harassed (Larkin & Rice, 2005). According to Zillmann (2000), pop culture media has become an important sexual socialization agent and frequent exposure to consistent themes about gender and sexual behavior that depict males as dominant and females as sexually available (Cowan & Dunn, 1994) can affect a young person’s developing sense of sexuality and increase boys’ willingness to engage in sexually harassing behaviours. Similarly, Brown and L’Engle (2009) argue that exposure to sexually explicit media in early adolescence is related to frequency in sexual harassment,

and may explain why sexual harassment has become normative in some schools (Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Fineran & Bennett, 1999). Media is often substantiated as a primary source of information that perpetuates the discourse of objectified female bodies and contributes to the prevalence of sexual harassment. Girls' conversations in the focus group revealed specifically how sexual harassment manifested itself in their schools social world, how they reacted to it, and how they felt about teacher involvement and lack of involvement.

Media pressure, dating, and sexual harassment

Girls learn from pop culture media that focuses on them as a target audience, particularly from magazines, about the norms that structure heteronormative dating practices (Brown & Stern, 2002). While dating behaviours are a part of gender socialization, the process of dating, as noted by Christian-Smith (1990), "may be many things, but it is neither simple nor innocent" (1990, p. 28). For instance, studies (such as Quatman, Sampson, Robinson, & Watson, 2001) indicate that depictions of girls in media such as television, movies, and books reveal a pressure on girls to engage in romantic relationships while ignoring their education, and boys to feel an increase in pressure to conform to dominant expectations of masculinity and to begin forming heterosexual romantic relationships (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005). The girls' responses in the focus group signified that boys often attempted to form romantic relationships with them, which made them feel anxious and uncomfortable.

As Louise explained,

When a guy asks me out I get a really weird feeling, it's just something that courses through my body and it's just cold and it feels like dead, like I'll like die or something, like I feel like what should I do, what should I do?

Myra expressed a similar sentiment, “I feel kind of weird and embarrassed that there’s going to be like a very uncomfortable question asked to me, and it’s just like, I don’t know like, I’m always scared of being asked to be a girlfriend.” Similarly, Louise expressed unease when offered gifts from boys at school:

Another thing that makes me kind of uncomfortable is when a guy gives you a random present out of no where, like a really nice present that you love, and I’m like why’d you give this to me and they’re like, no specific reason, I thought you were just nice. I’m like okay I’ll keep it and everything and be like ok and I’ll give him a present back cause I don’t know what it means.

These young girls’ comments exemplify not only how they felt pressured to participate in acts of affection, but also the subtext of a perceived pressure to be sexual. As the pressure to engage in heterosexual romantic relationships from the media continues to increase, the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles may also increase. During the focus groups, the girls demonstrated their understanding of the pressures boys receive to participate in hegemonic masculinities. The girls’ comments appear to corroborate Connell’s (1995) description of the male stereotype, which encourages the very essence of what hegemonic masculinity means: objectification of females and competition with other men in an effort to gain the affection and attention of females to establish male dominance. For instance, Courtney explained that boys often stop at nothing to “get the girl” because:

If [a boy] likes a girl and the other guy likes the girl and one guy starts dating her so then the other one might get made fun of cause the girl doesn’t like him. Usually they get made fun of cause 2 boys like a girl and the girl only likes one of them and the boy gets made fun of.

The group of 8-10 year old girls discussed incidents when boys would “try and kiss” them and “touch” them without permission. Katniss explained:

[Boys] are like pretty hair and I'm like don't touch my hair. One time there was this really cute guy who was into me and every time I walked past him he was like touching my hair, touching me and I was like don't touch me cause I don't like it when boys touch me.

As Stein (2005) argues, boys often view harassment as proof of virility within their peer group, which cause students to view harassment “as a public performance which is normalized, expected and tolerated” (p. 61). For the girls in the focus group, the problem of harassment was associated with unwanted physical contact. Within a patriarchal society that positions boys in a dominant roles, boys believed themselves superior to girls and learned to use harassment as a form of entitlement to girls' bodies. In this way, gendered behaviors are shown to begin in elementary school.

When boys were not actively trying to touch or kiss girls, they would “look” or “stare” at them, or make sexual advances or gestures towards them. Katniss noted that she felt extremely uncomfortable “When boys give me like a really, really weird look.” Myra agreed, “When [boys] stare at me it creeps me out.” Similar to Stein's description of sexual harassment, the act of boys “staring,” or “leering” (p. 64) contributed to a sense of discomfort girls experienced in school as they were reminded regularly that their bodies were subjected to and always available for the male gaze.

Harassment did not seem to be an isolated incident, as all the girls reported being harassed on a regular basis. In the focus groups, the girls did not exert agency in personal situations with boys. Yet, they did speak about standing up for one another in potentially threatening or uncomfortable situations. For instance Courtney explained, “When I was sad because a boy was teasing me, my friends stood up and told the boy to go [away].” Similarly, Katniss recalled a time when a boy “called me a fat ho...[and] another girl stood up [to him for me].” The normalization of sexual harassment in the media

disregards the engendering of sexual harassment in elementary school as violence is replicated and the female body becomes the focus of inequitable gender relations (Larkin & Rice, 2005). The girls' descriptions of unwanted "touching," "teasing," and "staring," explicate that media literacy in schools is necessary as it has the potential to counteract sexual harassment and violent behaviours that undoubtedly exist within the sanctions of school discourse.

Harassment and teacher intervention

The girls not only experienced discomfort with displays of affection, but also felt unprotected in their school environment as threats of more physical and aggressive behaviours from boys went unnoticed. Courtney explained, "[one boy] takes my lunch and throws it into the garbage, he takes my money and spends it on whatever he wants and then he just pushes me." As Renold (2002) observes, some boys also use violence in the production of "hegemonic heterosexual masculinities" (p. 322). I asked Courtney what she did when this happened, and she explained that she used to have a boyfriend, which she defined as, "a boy you hang out with at school," who would protect her and make her feel safe:

When I was dating him he always like, if someone bothered me he always like used to come up and say stop bugging her so it was kind of nice having him, but then he broke up with me for no reason.

As Marsh (2000) suggests, popular culture relegates girls as not strong or brave enough when targeted by boys. Thus, girls require a powerful, strong, and aggressive male 'superhero' who serves to protect the 'whimpering' girl. To investigate the culture of Courtney's school further, I asked, "What do teachers do when this happens? Do you tell on the boys? Do the teachers notice?" Courtney's response was alarming, "My teacher

doesn't care because my school is ghetto, like literally is ghetto." Courtney's response signifies that she was aware of her elementary school's social class and how it created a differential and disadvantageous educational experience for her. As Stein (2005) argues, schools are training grounds for domestic violence, as sexual harassment is rendered invisible in the school setting. In this research, the silence and disregard of the school faculty and staff that Courtney reported allowed gender-based harassment to occur and in turn, Courtney learned to seek alternative protection from her boyfriend.

Katniss also recounted an incident when appropriate teacher intervention did not occur: "A couple nights ago, there was this guy who called me a ho and so I told [on him and] she just told him not to say it again but that's all she did and I was like seriously?" The remainder of the girls in the focus group reported similar occurrences. "If something uncomfortable happens, I normally don't tell a teacher because that would feel really weird," Myra explained. She rationalized that telling teachers was useless because, "Usually if there's a bully, the teacher will just say she'll talk to them later but the bullies just keep coming back and keep on doing the same thing." "Yeah" shouted Coco, "Every time my friend is bullied at school my teacher will just say, did you tell anyone outside?" Courtney responded, "My teachers said that a bunch of times too!" Erin then added:

Once I was outside and this guy he called me a freaking retard, and I told [my teacher] what he called me and she did nothing about it. She just talked to him and said don't call people that. He kept doing it.

All of the respondents reported harassment, most often described in terms associated with slanderous insults and unwanted touching. Yet, all of the girls discussed that they could not get affirmation from teachers about their experiences and thus nothing was done to stop the harassment. Similar to Schick's (2013) study, the participants

almost unanimously thought that teachers did not promote egalitarian and considerate types of discourse about girls. Instead, teachers encouraged a mass-media-generated discourse that directly fosters language and behavior that propagate sexual objectification, harassment, and violent behaviours toward girls. Schick (2013) explains:

...teachers, are actually contributing to the socialization of sexually harassing and threatening behaviors by boys toward girls, and the socialization of sexually objectified and otherwise submissive behavior by girls-with all this occurring within officially sanctioned school activities (pp. 51-52).

On the other hand, Katniss recounted an isolated incident when her “old teacher watched [for harassment] like a hawk.” Although Katniss’ experience is exclusive to one teacher, her story exemplifies Schick’s (2013) findings that some teachers work vigorously to “provide school environments that foster the development of positive self-esteem among girls as well as boys” (p. 53).

In addition to harassment perpetuated by boys in school, male staff members sometimes also cause discomfort for tween girls. For instance, Katniss expressed unease when she recited an interaction she had with a male janitor. Rather shy and seemingly embarrassed, Katniss told her story: “The Janitor is rude. One time, I was going up in the lunch room and accidentally bumped into him and he kept bumping back into me and was like oh I’m sorry and he knew I was there.” Katniss’ story correlates with Quinn’s (2002) assertion that sexual harassment, even when trivialized as play, functions as a game that boys and men play to exhibit masculinity, and when men and boys engage in this ‘game,’ they objectify girls and women, suppress empathy for them, and willingly ignore instances of female unease and appeals to “stop.”

Interestingly, Myra and Louise did not understand Katniss’ discomfort. “He was

probably joking around,” Myra said. “Yeah he jokes around,” Louise added. Katniss seemed rather distraught and whispered, “He doesn’t joke.” Myra and Louise’s comments suggest that they viewed harassment “as a public performance which is normalized, expected, and tolerated” (Stein, 2005, p. 61).

These findings indicate that more adult presence and effective and consistent action is essential in schools. Many of the participants recognized that, while some adults participate in acts of harassment, other adults see harassment but do not intervene; because harassment rarely gets punished, girls’ trust in adults can be diminished and they may withdraw their belief that school is a safe or fair environment (Stein, 2005). Sexual harassment specifically “interferes with a student’s right to receive equal educational opportunities” and lessens the quality of school life in general (p. 61). The normalization of violence and misogyny in a young mind is cause for concern. The overt sexism against girls by teachers, school staff, and male students highlights the dire need to address sexual harassment in schools.

Listening to Girls’ Voices

Despite the great strides in recent years of increased opportunities for girls’ academic success, there are elements of education that simultaneously limit them. Involving girls in broader discourses and engaging them in conversations that relate directly to their experiences as students has proved to be an enlightening endeavor. The girls in this study eagerly volunteered to participate, demonstrated confidence and agency through the use of language, and were able to deconstruct and begin to reconstruct what they needed and wanted in school. Throughout the process of conducting this research, the girls were able to thoughtfully and jointly construct meaning on school discourses

and were able to negotiate meaning and share power in the focus groups setting.

To bring this study to a close, I highlight implications to improve and create change in education using girls' stories, voices, and educational experiences as primary sources of knowledge.

Girls only: "Relaxed," "trusting," and "comfortable" spaces

Some of the girls' suggestions were controversial amongst the group and were seen as slightly extreme. For instance, Katniss shared her desire for single-sex schools, which correlates with some current research that suggests the atmosphere would be more cooperative, less-competitive, and would generate lower stress levels and a greater sense of belonging for girls in a single-sex classroom (Brutsaert & Van Houtte, 2004). The exception to this trend is that female students in single-sex schools report an increase in aggression, rejection, and victimization (Barton & Cohen, 2004) as well as more eating disorders, compared to female students in coeducational schools (Mensing, 2001). After further discussion, single-sex schools were eventually ruled out because, as Myra explained, "If everyone was the same gender it would be too different."

Through further discussion, the participants agreed on some practical solutions that would help them learn about themselves and their schools social world, and find a meaningful place within it. The girls decided that their schools needed to create "relaxed," "trusting," and "comfortable," spaces for girls-only to share their thoughts and feelings, and to "tell your secrets." Similar to the "On the Move" program at the BGCTB, the girls decided that it would be beneficial for schools to set up inclusive, safe spaces for female students to share their feelings and thoughts. The participants concluded that acquiring girl-only spaces would be beneficial because, "If there's something your sad about

people can help you with it,” and because girls will have a space where they can challenge, deconstruct, and discuss the assumptions and stereotypes that surround them, “so we don’t feel like we’re the only ones with problems.”

The girls in the focus group desired a safe, respectful, and caring atmosphere where they could engage with their learning, think critically and analytically, feel a sense of agency, and have their voices heard. The use of girl-only groups at school, whether they are held during lunch, recess, or after school, can help to teach girls—and educators alike— to find and to use agency and voice, to share power, and to engage meaningfully in each others lives. As Fielding (2004) argues, for the discourses between students and educators to be transformational for both groups, there needs to be spaces created where teachers and students “meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together” (p. 309). Thus, to counter feelings of powerlessness, so that girls’ voices can be heard, safe venues where female students can express their thoughts and feelings, tell their stories, listen respectfully to the stories of others, and where they can ask questions and bring topics of concern to discuss and negotiate must be created. Educators must also participate, ask questions, examine current classroom practices, programs, and policies, and jointly construct meaningful solutions to the problems girls face at school.

Recommendations for teachers

The girls in the focus group voiced a need for educators to challenge their preconceptions, to assess students on an individual basis and to actively discipline boys if they were caught bullying or making girls feel uncomfortable. To begin, the girls urged teachers to stop “Yelling out,” because they felt that it is not a productive endeavor and

students end up thinking that such teachers are “mean.” Instead, the girls suggested, teachers should attempt “To not yell” and to “just speak clearly.” Interestingly, the girls were able to reason that yelling “sometimes” was acceptable and understandable. As Louise explained, if “kids in class randomly talk when they want to, sometimes that gets annoying so [teachers] yell a bit and that’s cool.” What girls deemed problematic was not student discipline or teachers’ efforts to control the class, but rather the yelling, which they felt was not fair practice in all instances because “[teachers] don’t even give kids a chance” to explain themselves before they react. As the conversation continued, the girls’ reflected on their own experiences inside the classroom. They explained that they were often “yelled” at for not engaging in class or for not “doing our homework.” As noted earlier, these can be used as acts of resistance, not defiance and what girls truly desire is for their teachers to lessen their feelings of isolation and powerlessness. The girls in the focus group provided insight into what resistance means to them as well as how and what they resisted. They helped to broaden the definition of resistance and challenged prevailing conceptions of girlhood. The girls’ recommendations exemplify that when educators understand resistance and recognize the many outlets of it, they will be able to hear girls’ voices and concerns more clearly and also encourage and support girls as they engage in the process of resistance.

The girls added that educators have a responsibility to ensure that they contribute to their feelings of safety, security and fair treatment inside the classroom. The girls in the focus group advocated that teachers must think critically about the repercussions of not disciplining boys for being “mean” to girls. Katniss originally explained how she wanted boys to be “expelled” for “bullying” or “making fun” of girls in school. However,

as the discussion evolved, the girls decided that, to be fair, boys should “have three chances and on the third strike” they should be reprimanded.

There are many caring and involved teachers who listen to and involve their students in classroom and school activities in a safe and inclusive way. However, based on the girls suggestions, there must be a more wide spread understanding and practice by teachers to discipline harassment and bullying, to educate students on media discourses that encourage and perpetuate these negative gendered stereotypes and behaviours and to understand how complex, detrimental and damaging the lack of support and understanding for girls acts of resistance can be on their development, self-esteem and success.

Recommendations for future tween girls

Many of the girls in the focus group had gone through complications, struggles and confusion while navigating their schools social world that they did not want to see other girls face. To alter the educational system that they had such great difficulty navigating, they chose to encourage future tween girls to empower themselves and to participate in acts of resistance.

They also offered impeccable educational advice that they argued would help guide girls through elementary school. The girls in the focus group collectively encouraged the next generation of tween girls to question their ideas of the status quo, to acknowledge their diverse talents, to accept their failures and to tell their stories. Out of concern that future girls would “change how they act” because of “someone that’s forcing you to change,” the girls in the focus group suggested that future tween girls should “always be yourself,” “stand up for who you are,” and to “just be who are”

because people should “like [you] for who [you are].” The girls in the focus group also urged future tween girls to “speak up and don’t listen to bullies.” Taylor also added that they should “walk away from mean people,” and “stand up to whoever is mean or ignore them so they look silly” added Amy. The girls also explained the importance of telling “your teacher if you’re being bullied,” so that they did not have to deal with bullies alone.

In addition, the girls offered academic advice for future tween girls. Louise described that, “This is, I think would be the weirdest advice, but the grades might get worse as you get older but everybody else might get better.” Katniss added, “Math gets harder.” The girls acknowledged that school may become more difficult and at times may seem too difficult to accomplish, yet they also offered words of encouragement, and methods to achieve and maintain success. As Erin eagerly noted, you can get through it, just “Try not to do bad in school and try to get all B’s or As and C’s so they look good on your report card and listen and put up your hand if you have something to say instead of making your teacher mad.” The group of 8-10 year old girls successfully mentored other tween girls and as they used the lessons they had learned throughout their educational experiences to empower others to make good choices, to maintain their voice and authenticity, and to stay positive, work hard and believe in one’s self, as they make their way through the social and developmental pressures and tribulations of preadolescence.

Girls’ explanations of concerns, issues and advice need to be heard in the process of decision-making, as well as in the selection of appropriate strategies and programs to produce effective outcomes in schools. Changes need to be constructed through discourses that meet the individual and group needs and interests of preadolescent girls in order to be relevant and meaningful to both students and educators. As Rudduck and

Fielding (2006) claim, the development of agency and self-confidence for students happens most successfully when students can explore their points of view and have a real say in matters that are important to them.

Through this study, the girls grew to appreciate and to develop their own voices and a clearer sense of how and why they experienced certain struggles at school. The girls were articulate, bright, confident and reflective and were able to build on their peers thoughts and ideas, delve into and explore the complexity within conversations and find meaning in their peers' comments. Although they occasionally struggled with differences in opinions, the process of engaging girls on topics of interest to them was invaluable as girls had the opportunity to demonstrate their capability to reflect, articulate, and construct meaning on topics of interest to them. Certainly, there is wisdom to be gained by listening to girls' voices, as their perspectives are illuminating.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Through the Boys and Girls Club of Thunder Bay, this research explored how media content, parlayed through the hidden curriculum, affects preadolescent girls' educational experiences. Through a feminist post-structural framework, I explored how girls' gender identities and gender performances are continually contested and negotiated, and are contingent on broader social contexts and thus, malleable. Through the use of focus groups and photo-elicitation, I identified gaps between media and education, as the girls' identified both explicit and implicit media messages in the hidden curriculum that lead to the social reproduction of stereotypical female gender roles and expectations, one of which was to not appear to be "too smart."

While this study emphasizes support for preadolescent girls' voices, it also reveals the influence of media on the participants' perceptions of the school environment, as well as results that seek to improve the school climate for girls to not have to conform to stereotypical, normative gender roles and to be as successful academically as they want to be. In summary, preadolescent girls' choices of femininity are limited as heteronormative femininity constructs impossible standards of beauty and bodily "perfection." Girls' experiences inside the mathematics classroom, in particular, also signify the unequal treatment girls receive from teachers. Further, sexual harassment that is rooted in sexual stereotypes perpetuated by the pop culture media has become a part of the hidden curriculum as it is rendered normative in school settings. In this way, media-generated stereotypes and behaviors are shown to begin to manifest in the hidden curriculum as early as elementary school. By offering girls a platform to discuss their knowledge, voice their frustrations, and use their stories to resist devaluation, the focus

group discussions were certainly an insightful tool for developing recommendations that are useful for schools and community organizations alike.

For instance, the girls advocated that they desired more girls-only “trusting,” “relaxed,” and “comfortable,” spaces for them to share their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Because the girls enjoyed engaging with learning, thinking critically, feeling a sense of agency and having their voices heard in a safe, respected space, and felt “lucky that we have been able to participate,” in the “On the Move” program at the BGCTB, they recommend that schools should set up inclusive, safe spaces for female students to share their feelings and thoughts as well. As girls-only groups were effective in this study, it is recommend that the BGCTB continue to educate preadolescent girls on media literacy through girls-only specific programming, but also to form partnerships with local school boards to create multiple critical media literacy dialogues that are dually offered and implemented to maximize efficacy. As educators, it is vital to create multiple, meaningful, and safe venues for girls to engage in media literacy programs that are equally efficient and effective, so that all preadolescent girls can experience, learn, and engage with media literacy, the way the girls in this focus group were able to.

This study exemplifies the importance of implementing and maintaining media literacy programs in elementary school that are relevant to the issues that many girls currently experience. Girls’ need to be heard and need to be a part of the process as their explanation of issues and concerns on their current and past experiences will aid in the selection of appropriate strategies, programs, and regulations in media literacy education. To be most effective, however, students, educators, parents and local community organizations such as the BGCTB need to be an integral part of the process as well.

Media literacy must become a vital part of girls' educational experiences through school and community organizations so that they can access the dominant discourse, understand it and interrupt it. Overall, if we, as educators, hear girls' voices, listen to their stories, and give meaning to their experiences more often, we will be able to develop and implement real and meaningful changes that place emphasis on fair and equal educational practices so that, as Myra put it, girls no longer "feel like we're the only ones with problems."

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule for Girls age 8-10

General Research Questions:

4. How do girls feel about the media they are exposed to and how do they make sense of how femininity, heterosexuality and the body are constructed through the hidden curriculum; what are the perceived influences of the media on the hidden curriculum they are exposed to?
5. How do girls learn about what their school expects of them, and how does it compare to what the media expects of them? How is their involvement and engagement in school influenced by those expectations?
6. How do girls think their experiences of being female fits with their understanding of the school's expectations? How do preadolescent girls deal with, challenge, and/or subvert the social and educational expectations of their teachers and schools?

Themes Associated with Peer Group Interviews:

1. The meanings girls derive from the media
2. Girls use of media to negotiate a sense of agency in school
3. Girls feelings about how the media impacts how they are treated in school
4. Girls' experiences of how teachers, and/or classroom rituals replicate what they see in the media
5. Discover how girls' stories suggest to educators what they can do to improve girls' educational experiences

Interview Guide

1. Can you describe the girls/women in these pictures?
2. What are your favourite parts about these pictures?
3. What do you like/dislike about the pictures and why?
4. Do you think pictures like these effect girls ? If so, in what ways?
5. How are the girls in these pictures the same or different from the girls you know?
6. How do you think other girls and boys use these pictures?
7. Do you think girls have different problems at school than boys do?
8. Do you have any problems or worries when you are at school?
9. How do you deal with the problems and worries you have at school?

10. Do you think the girls/women would do well at school? If so, what would they be good at?
11. Do you think boys and girls are better at certain subjects in school?
12. How do these differences between boys and girls make you feel?
13. Do you ever feel that being a girl is hard? If so, can you share some examples?
14. Do you think boys are treated the same as girls at school? If not, how does this make you feel?
15. Are girls treated differently than boys in certain classes? If so, how do you deal with these differences?
16. Do you ever feel pressure to look and act a certain way at school?
17. Do you think there are people, either friends or teachers or media, who make you feel like you have to look and act a certain way at school?
18. If you could, what would you change about school?
19. Are some of the problems you have in school shown on television shows, movies, magazines, etc.?

Appendix B - Interview Schedule for Girls age 11-14

General Research Questions:

1. How do girls feel about the media they are exposed to and how do they make sense of how femininity, heterosexuality and the body are constructed through the hidden curriculum; what are the perceived influences of the media on the hidden curriculum they are exposed to?
2. How do girls learn about what their school expects of them, and how does it compare to what the media expects of them? How is their involvement and engagement in school influenced by those expectations?
3. How do girls think their experiences of being female fits with their understanding of the school's expectations? How do preadolescent girls deal with, challenge, and/or subvert the social and educational expectations of their teachers and schools?

Themes Associated with Peer Group Interviews:

1. The meanings girls derive from the media
2. Girls use of media to negotiate a sense of agency in school
3. Girls feelings about how the media impacts how they are treated in school
4. Girls' experiences of how teachers, and/or classroom rituals replicate what they see in the media
5. Discover how girls' stories suggest to educators what they can do to improve girls' educational experiences

Interview Guide

1. How do you describe these celebrities?
2. What are your favourite parts about these celebrities/images?
3. What do you like/dislike about the images and why?
4. How might these images be influential in girls' experiences?
5. How are the girls in these images similar or different from the girls you know?
6. How do you think other girls and boys might use and/or interpret these images?
7. Do you think girls have different pressures in their lives than boys do?
8. What are some pressures, worries or problems for girls at school?

9. How do you deal with the pressures, worries or problems?
10. Do you see a relationship between looking like one of these celebrities and being good at school? If so, what relationship do you see?
11. Do you perceive gender differences around academic success?
12. How do these gender differences make you feel and how do you negotiate these expectations?
13. Do you ever feel disadvantaged as a girl? If yes, does it bother you?
14. Are boys and girls treated equally in school? If not, how do you react?
15. Have you experienced sexism (boys treated differently than girls) in the classroom?
16. Do you ever feel a sense of unequal pressure about how your body looks and how you act at school?
17. Do you feel there are other people, either friends or teachers or media, who either directly or indirectly put pressure on you to look and act a certain way at school?
18. If you could, what would you change about school?
19. Do you see some of the issues you face in school depicted in the media?

Appendix C - Letter dated February 13, 2014, from Lakehead University Office of
Research Services re: ethical approval

Lakehead
UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Services

Tel 807-343-8934
Fax 807-346-7749

February 13, 2014

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jane Nicholas
Student Investigator: Jamilee Baroud
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

Dear Dr. Nicholas and Ms Baroud:

Re: REB Project #: 097 13-14 / Romeo File No: 1463646
Granting Agency: N/A
Granting Agency Project #: N/A

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project titled, "Gendered media representations of sexiness and their effects on girls".

Ethics approval is valid until February 13, 2015. Please submit a Request for Renewal form to the Office of Research Services by January 13, 2015 if your research involving human subjects will continue for longer than one year. A Final Report must be submitted promptly upon completion of the project. Research Ethics Board forms are available through the Romeo Research Portal at:

<http://romeo.lakeheadu.ca>

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms must not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Richard Maundrell
Chair, Research Ethics Board

/scw

Appendix D - Cover Letter for Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

My name is Jamilee Baroud and I am a graduate student in Lakehead University's Master of Education program with a Specialization in Women's Studies. Please take a moment to read this document carefully. It will help you decide whether or not you would like your daughter to take part in this project. I will also be asking your daughter's permission. Both you and your daughter must give written permission in order to be included in this study.

I am doing a study about girls, education, and the media. I am looking for volunteers to participate in my project. I want to talk to your daughter about her thoughts on the media – including T.V., music videos, fashion magazines, movies and advertising, and how she thinks about herself at school. The information gathered in this study may be used to develop programs that meet the needs of younger girls. The information will be used for my Master's thesis at Lakehead University.

If you agree, your daughter may take part in three discussion groups at the Boys and Girls Club with other girls her age. The girls will be separated by age into two groups, 8-10 year olds and 11-14 year olds. There is no expected risk or physical or psychological harm involved in this study. There will be information on counseling available to her if needed. The discussions will last 45 minutes each and I will provide food and drink. Your daughter will be asked to think about how the media influences her life and the lives of other girls her age and how they feel it effects their education. I will ask questions on topics that girls already talk about.

All the information your daughter gives during this research will be confidential. Only the people in the group discussion and I will know who your daughter is. No one else will be able to identify her later by what she shares. She will choose an alias or fake name that only her and I will know. I will ask the other members of the focus group to keep what your daughter says confidential, but I cannot guarantee that they will do so. Your daughters real name will not be used in anything I write. Your daughter does not have to talk if she does not want to. It is completely up to her to share only what she feels comfortable.

Your daughter can easily stop taking part in this project if she changes her mind and she can leave the group at any time. If your daughter changes her mind, she can ask that everything she said be removed from the project before it is finished. If your daughter chooses not to participate, and/or chooses to dropout of this project, it will not affect her present or future relationship with the Boys and Girls Club or any of their programming.

I will be running the discussion and taking notes. The discussions will be audio taped for my use only. I will listen to the tape recorder afterwards to identify the themes girls talk about and the words they use. I will organize a follow-up activity and group discussion

with girls and parents to share the results of the study. If you want, you can have at that time a copy of the study's written report.

If at any time you have questions or concerns about this study, you can contact my thesis supervisor Dr. Jane Nicholas at Lakehead University's Women's Studies Department at 807-343-8059. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8283 or research@lakeheadu.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jamilee Baroud
Graduate Student at Lakehead University
613-297-4919, jbaroud@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix E - Parent/Guardian Consent Form

My signature on this sheet indicates that I agree to have my daughter take part in a study by Jamilee Baroud on how girls (8-14 years old) deal with the pressure from the media to focus on beauty and femininity at the expense of their educational goals. It also indicates that I understand the following:

1. Participation is voluntary and only the girls and a parent or guardian who have a signed consent forms will be included in the project.
2. If you do not want your daughter to participate, this will not affect your daughter's present or future relationship with the Boys and Girls Club.
3. Your daughter will be audio recorded in the discussion group as part of the project.
4. Your daughter is free to stop taking part in the group discussion any time she wants. If needed, the Boys and Girls Club will provide details about counselling during and after the sessions.
5. Your daughter may choose not to answer any question.
6. You may ask questions at any time. If you change your mind, you may ask that all the information your daughter gave be removed from the project before it is completed.
7. The information gathered during this project will be kept strictly confidential, but I cannot guarantee that everyone in the group will honour confidentiality.
8. All of the information Jamilee collects for her project will be kept in a safe place at Lakehead University for five years and then it will be destroyed.
9. Since it is to the girls' advantage to protect others identities, I will encourage them to do so every step of the process, but I cannot guarantee that they will do so.
10. There is no anticipated risk or physical or psychological harm involved in this study. If needed, the Boys and Girls Club will provide details about counselling during and after the sessions.
11. The results of the study will be used for my thesis and may be used to develop new programs for young girls and might be published. I will never use any names or information that could identify your child because she will choose an alias or fake name that only her and I will know.

I have read/understood the cover/information letter for this study.

_____ Yes, I would like my child to participate in the study. I understand the results might be published but that her identity will be protected at all times. I also understand that I am entitled to change my mind.

_____ No, I do not want my child to participate in this study
If you decide that your daughter can participate, please let me know of any food allergies or sensitivities in the space provided below.

Allergies and Food Sensitivities: _____

Child's name _____

Parent/ Guardian name _____

Signature _____

Date

Appendix F - Participant Introductory Letter

Hi! I am a graduate student at Lakehead University where I am writing a Master's thesis in Education and Women's Studies. I am doing a study about girls, education, and the media. I am looking for volunteers to participate in my project. I want to talk to you about your thoughts on the media – including T.V., music videos, fashion magazines, movies and advertising, and how you think about yourself at school. Your voices are important to my study because I want to create a space where your ideas and experiences can be heard in order to create change to better the lives of girls your age.

The project will not take a lot of your time. If you agree to join this project, you may participate in 3 group discussions here at the community center, with other girls your age. During each discussion group, food and drink will be provided. You can easily stop participating in the project if you change your mind and you can leave the group at any time during discussions. There is no pressure to talk if you do not want to – it is completely up to you to share only what you feel comfortable saying. I will record these group discussions and take notes so I can study them later on. Everything you say during this project will be confidential; that means that only the people who are here will know who you are, no one else will be able to identify you later by what you share. I will ask the other girls in the group to keep what you say confidential, but I cannot guarantee that they will do so. I ask that you only make comments that you would be comfortable sharing in a group setting, and to refrain from comments you would not say in public. Your real name will not be used in anything I write. I would like you to invent a name for yourself that I can use when I refer to what you have said in the papers I will write. Only you and I will know your invented name. I will do my best to make this fun and informative for you. I look forward to your participation!

I will also need the consent of one of your parents or guardians before you can participate. Attached to this form you will find a separate letter for your parent/guardian to sign. If you decide not to participate or to stop participating, there won't be any consequences to the activities you do at the community center, so please don't worry.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me at,

613-297-4919, or at jbaroud@lakeheadu.ca

If you check "yes" on the part below, it means you have decided to participate and have read and understood this consent form. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Appendix G - Participant Consent Form

I _____ want to take part in the project with Jamilee Baroud as described in the letter.

Participant's Name/print please

I understand that:

1. I have read and understood the cover/information letter for the study.
2. I will be audio recorded in the discussion group as part of the project.
3. I don't have to take part in the project, but I want to be part of it, and I know I can change my mind about that later and it wouldn't be a problem. I can choose not to answer any question.
4. It is safe to be part of this project.
5. All of the information Jamilee collects for her project will be anonymized and confidential, but she cannot guarantee that everyone in the group will honour confidentiality.
6. All of the information Jamilee collects for her project will be kept in a safe place at Lakehead University for five years and then it will be destroyed.
7. My name or school will never be used in anything Jamilee writes about her project
8. Jamilee will use quotes from the transcripts of the audio recordings for her thesis, publications and girls' programs. She will never use your real name or information that could identify you because you will invent a name that only you and her will know.

If you want to be part of my project, please fill in this page.

_____ Yes, I would like to participate

_____ No, I do not want to participate

If you decide to participate, please inform me of any food allergies or sensitivities in the space provided below.

Allergies and Food Sensitivities: _____

Your real name and signature _____ _____
Name you would like me to use Date

Appendix H – Summary of Report for Parents/Guardians & Girls

Dear Parents/Guardians,

This letter is intended to share the results of Jamilee Baroud's study. With your permission and the permission of your daughter(s), three discussion groups were organized at the Boys and Girls Club with other girls her age. During the discussion groups, we discussed your daughter's thoughts on the media – including T.V., music videos, fashion magazines, movies and advertising, and how she thought about herself at school.

The three discussion groups revealed that to be popular, girls have to “have it all,” the “perfect” body, “natural” beauty, fashionable clothing, the newest electronics and high academic achievement. If a girl does not fit into these categories, she is often bullied, beaten up or called names at school. The girls explained that they struggled to be their true self while also trying to reach media standards in order to be likable, safe and secure at school.

The girls' also talked about their experiences inside the mathematics classroom and talked about the unequal treatment girls receive from teachers in comparison to boys. They explained that they are afraid to raise their hand in class because if they get the wrong answer, other students often make fun of them and call them stupid. The girls also thought that teachers were nicer to boys, and that teachers gave more attention to boys when they were misbehaving.

Lastly, the girls thought that boys were more powerful in school than girls and that boys often felt entitled to touch girls without asking. Boys also asked girls out on dates and gave them presents, which often made girls feel uncomfortable. When the girls told their teachers, they did not discipline the boys properly and this made the girls feel less protected at school.

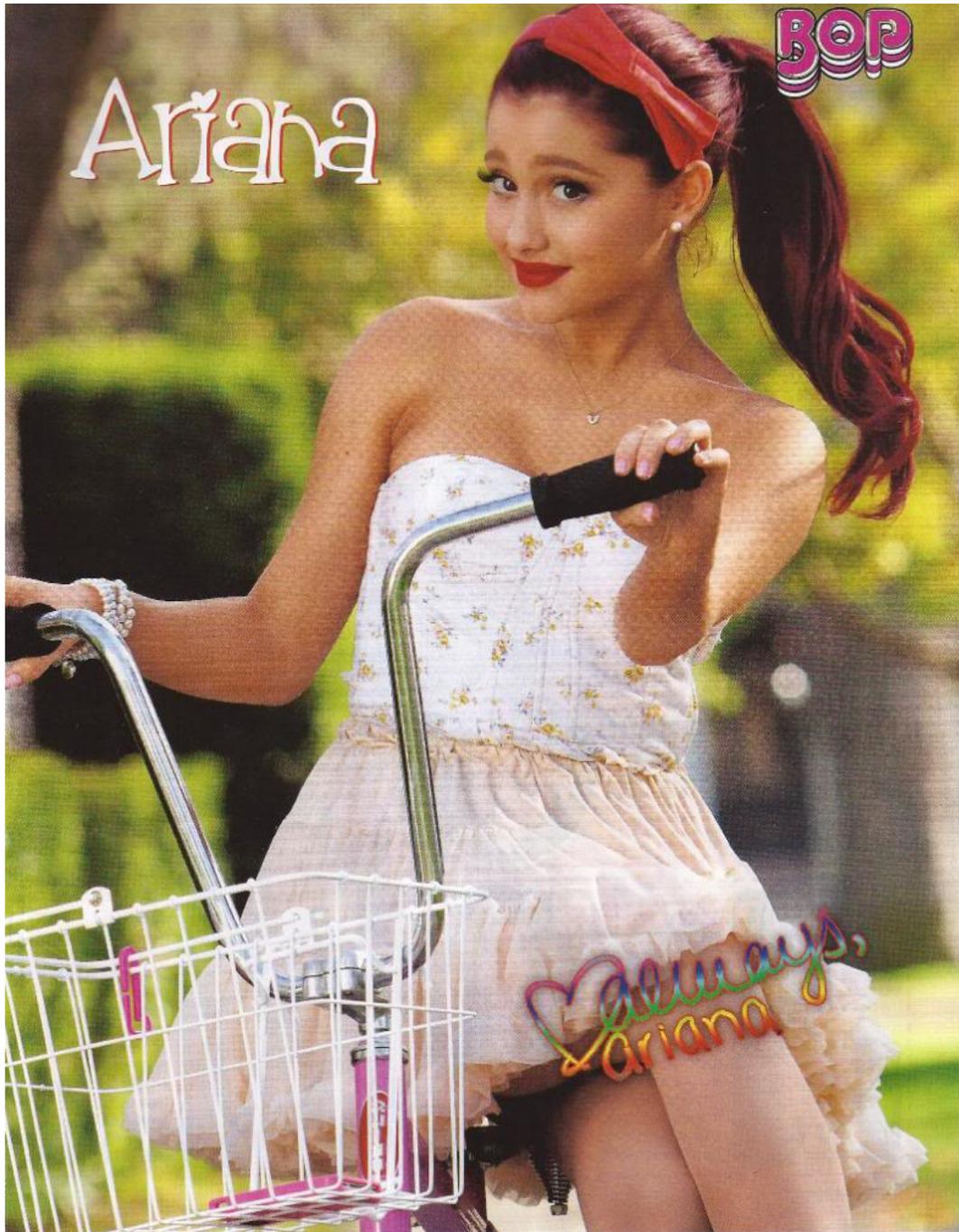
I will be developing programs and suggestions for educators based on the girls' stories and experiences in order to find solutions to your daughter's concerns. If you do have any questions or concerns or require further explanation of this study please feel free to contact me at, [807-343-8963](tel:807-343-8963) or jbaroud@lakeheadu.ca.

Thank you for your support and the allowance of your daughter's participation in this study. All of the girls in the discussion group were incredible and brought their own unique perspective to the project and treated the subject matter with care honesty and humour. I feel very privileged to have met them and have learned so much from each and every one of your brilliant, special and kind-hearted daughters.

Sincerely,

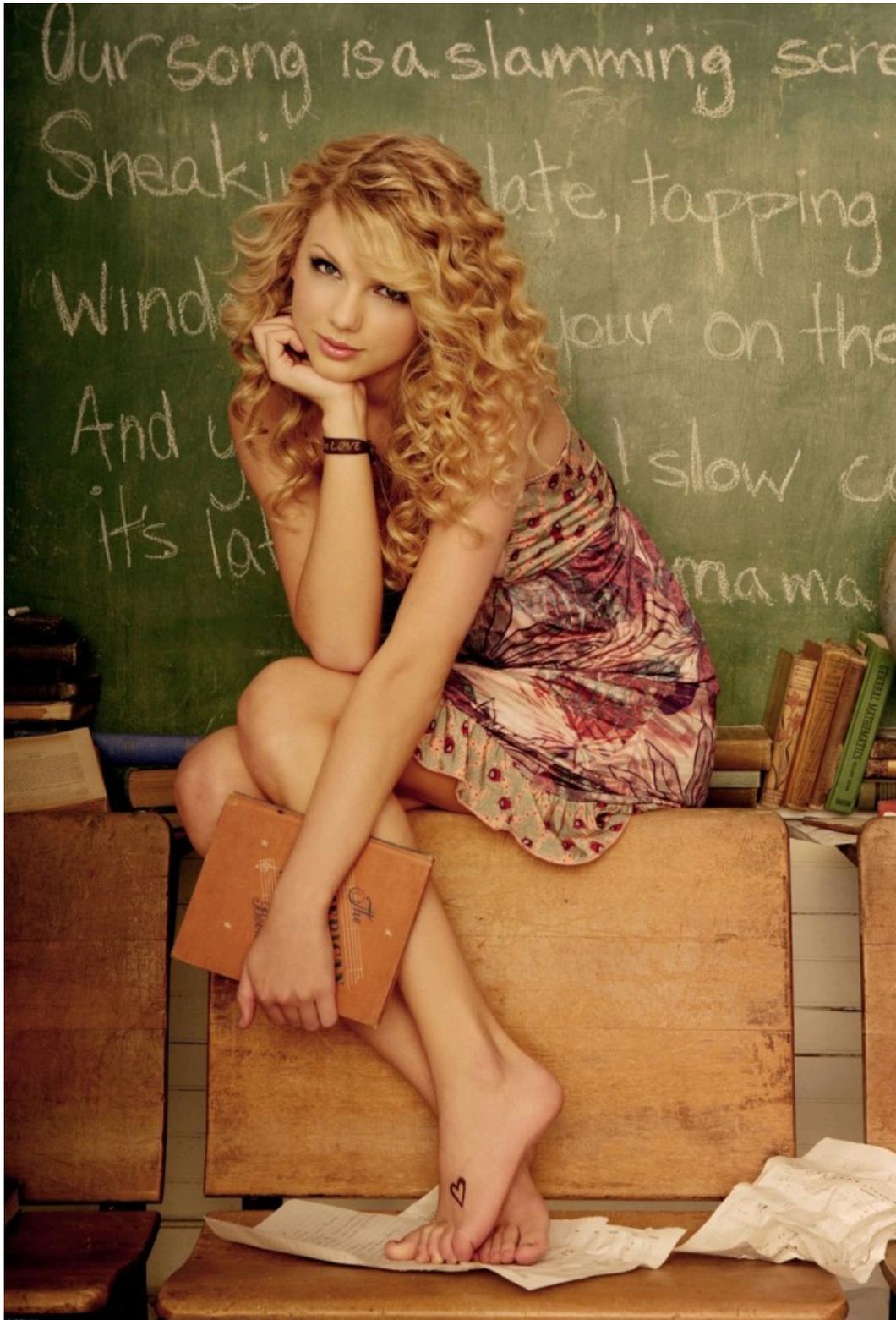
Jamilee Baroud

Appendix I – Images for Photo-elicitation

















Top looks
OF THE NIGHT

DAILYCANDY. at the Golden Globes



