THE ADULTS TALK WAY TOO MUCH: INTERVIEWS WITH LOW-INCOME URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS

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by Heather K. Farris-Vermeer
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URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS

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THE ADULTS TALK WAY TOO MUCH: INTERVIEWS WITH LOW-INCOME URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS

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November 2010
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The focus of this study is to examine the social and academic experiences of low-income girls in an urban middle school, and to understand, from the girls’ perspectives, how to improve urban education for their benefit. Study participants included seven girls who were interviewed three times toward the end of their eighth grade year. In addition to interviews, the girls also provided written artifacts that they believed described them as people and students. After the researcher extracted and coded themes from what the girls said about their experiences, member checking was completed. The results of the study were written as seven separate case studies. Additionally, the themes that arose from the study were explored and discussed. This study found that, while the girls generally enjoyed middle school more than they expected to, they had suggestions for improving the middle school experience. The most salient theme to arise from the study was that the girls felt that teachers and educators talk too much and seldom listen. Recommendations for educators include the following: provide school day time for students to discuss race and gender issues; find ways to make school more personal for students; listen to what girls have to say; and talk less.
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Most especially, thanks to the seven special girls in this study, who allowed me to learn more about them, and allowed me to learn from them how to improve the middle school experience for girls like them. I am inspired by all of you.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Critical theorists who do qualitative research are very interested in issues of gender, race and class, because they consider these the prime means for differentiating power in this society. -Bogdan and Biklen, 2003.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the lived educational experiences of adolescent, low-income girls from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Studies have shown that minority girls with a low socio-economic status encounter more barriers to a successful educational experience than do middle income girls (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2003; Corby Hodges, & Perry, 2007). For instance, the Guttmacher Institute (2006) reported that African American and Latina girls become pregnant on a more frequent basis than do Caucasian girls. Additionally, minority students tend to have a higher dropout rate and less success on standardized reading tests (US Department of Education, 2008). Insight into the academic and social experiences of low-income, minority, female students at school may help educators determine systemic and procedural changes that could improve these students’ success.

While working in an urban middle school, this researcher observed specific stresses, both academic and social, related to gender. Research supports this observation (Pipher, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Niemi, 2005). Middle school is a time when sexual feelings begin to blossoms and gender identity and gendered work becomes more
formed. Therefore, because this study was conducted in a middle school it was essential to incorporate gender and the expectations that go with it into this study.

This research study adds to the body of research on discourse and critical literacy in urban schools. Through this study, this researcher hopes to give a voice to urban adolescent girls of low-income families in addition to sharing insight from the informants about the ways income, race, ethnicity, and gender interact with the expectations of the American urban middle school. I also hope that what is learned through this study will guide urban educators to provide the best education to middle school girls in their schools.

This researcher assumes that several factors have an impact on students as they learn and socialize at school and that specific interactions at school are based upon these factors, which include the following: gender, income level, race, and culture. Related to these factors is the discourse these students bring to school and use in academic and social interactions. This researcher believes that there are some fundamental mismatches between the skills of low-income and minority middle school girls and the school system in which they learn. The mismatches are in skill sets and in basic understandings of the needs and experiences of the schools.

Justification of the Study

Education in America is for all students. Unfortunately, not all students do equally in America’s schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the 2006 dropout rates in the United States were 5.8% for Caucasian students, 10.7% for African American students, and 22.1% for Latino students (NCES, 2009). The NCES Fast Facts Website pages also show lower reading scores for minority students (NCES,
This researcher seeks to shine a light on the students who appear to be struggling in America’s schools and learn from them the ways in which American school systems can better meet their needs.

Of specific concern to this research are minority and low-income students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2004-2005 school year low-income students drop out at “six times the rate of high income students” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Minority race adolescents, as well, face compounded problems in middle school compared to their Caucasian peers (Carnegie, 1989). In order to improve achievement, all educators can benefit from learning more about students from these categories and how they learn.

Gender in America’s education system continues to be a source of research interest and concern for many educators (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Niemi, 2005; American Association of University Women, 1999; Goodwin, 2002). Middle schools in particular tend to be places where gender issues arise. Middle school is not just about academics, but social issues as well (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006). Unless educators view students through the lens in which they live they cannot truly seek to educate them. This researcher seeks to add to the existing research about middle school girls, particularly girls from low-income and minority families.

Definitions for the Study

Unless otherwise noted, the researcher defined the words below based upon understanding drawn from the literary review of current research in this area.

- adolescence: a period of physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to maturity (The Free Dictionary)
African American: native of the United States, descended from Africa

Caucasian American: person primarily of European descent, not Latina or African American

Discourse: “[way] of being in the world; [form] of life which integrate words, acts, values, attitudes, and social identities” (Gee, 1989, p.6)

discourse: individual language use as part of Discourse (Gee, 1989)

discourse analysis: analysis of language use for a particular person or group of people

dominant discourse—discourse of the group of people in power

Latina American: woman or girl from Latin America or descended from Latin America

primary discourse: an individual’s most natural way of using language

private literacies: reading and writing practices kept private

public literacies: reading and writing practices shared with others

secondary discourse: an individual’s secondary use of language, usually used less comfortably

white capital: advantage bestowed upon Caucasian Americans simply because of being a member of the group in power in America’s social systems

Theory Base

The theoretical basis of this research is that of critical theory. Elements of this theory that are included are critical literacy, critical race theory, and critical feminism. Critical theory focuses on the influence of power and relationships in social systems (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Critical literacy looks at the same issues within language and literacy (Gee, 1989; Hicks, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Rogers, 2003), just as critical
race provides this emphasis for race (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Yasso, 2005; Williams, 2004), and feminism provides this emphasis for gender (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003).

Critical theory is the logical lens through which to view this research. The theory’s focus on power and relationships within social systems matches the purpose of this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), which is to highlight the thoughts, words, and voices of low-income, minority adolescent girls in an urban middle school and use the information to make positive changes to their school experiences.

Methodology

Qualitative research is the obvious choice for this research study. In order to truly give voice to the informants in this study, the research method should emphasize depth rather than breadth. Although quantitative research allows for a broader view, qualitative research allows for a deeper, more intimate understanding of study participants.

Research Questions

In order to give educators information about the lives and needs of low-income middle school girls, as well as to emphasize the voice and identity of the girls in the study, this researcher seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the academic and social experiences of low-income urban middle school girls from low-income families?
2. Do these experiences vary by culture and/or race?
3. In what ways do primary and secondary literacy and discourse practices influence these experiences?
4. Do these experiences lead to a lack of academic or social success for the girls?
5. Do the informants' primary and secondary discourse practices lead to added stress for the girls?

6. What school changes can these girls suggest to alleviate academic and social stresses that they experience?

Procedures

In order to understand the middle school experiences of low-income, eighth grade girls, this researcher spent time with the girls in their school setting. In depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary method used to learn about the study participants. Interviews focused on the girls' academic and social experiences at school. The interviews were then transcribed and the researcher looked for common threads throughout the girls' experiences. The researcher used member checking to ensure understanding and add reliability to the information given by the informants. Additionally, the girls were asked to provide written artifacts and keep a simple journal in order to triangulate the interview data.

Summary

In a country where thousands of low-income girls attend middle level schools, it behooves educational researchers to spend time focusing on how these girls see themselves in middle school. By allowing low-income, female students a chance to show educators how they experience middle school, the research not only gives voice to an important segment of the American school population, but also gives educators a chance to improve our school systems to better meet students' needs. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge about the experiences of low-income girls and attempts to find ways to improve the middle school experience for these students. Additionally, this
study adds to the body of knowledge about critical literacy and the systemic affects of academic and social school expectations of low-income, urban, middle school girls.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Linguistics is a moral matter.* -Gee, 1990

Introduction

Through this study, the researcher hopes to increase urban educators' understanding of the school lives of low-income, urban, middle school girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. To accomplish this goal, this researcher examined the lives of African American, Caucasian and Latina low-income girls at one middle school through the lens of critical feminism using the tool of discourse analysis. This increased understanding of the social and academic experiences of these girls within the social system of an urban middle school aids adults in one school and perhaps others like it to understand and better teach their students.

In order to ground this study in relevant literature and current research, this chapter reviews theories that are pertinent to this study and its informants. These theories include critical theory, feminism, and critical literacy. Additional relevant theories included in this discussion are general adolescent and middle school research; research specific to girls, and particularly girls of minority racial and cultural backgrounds; and research on low-income families. Finally, information about social and academic discourse and discourse analysis is also shared.

Critical Theory, Critical Feminism, and Critical Race Theory

In order to understand the experiences of low-income girls in an urban middle school, attention must be given to both social and academic experiences of the girls.
Social and academic success or failure, all contribute to each girl’s feelings of power and membership as she goes through life in an urban middle school.

The theoretical construct of this research is that of Critical theory. Critical theory is an offshoot of Marxist theory, which focuses on social processes of society as well as the interaction of individuals and systems within a culture. The vision of critical theory, which was most likely first used at the Frankfurt school in the 1920s, is that of social transformation and the questioning of established norms (Ozmon & Craver, 1990).

Critical theory focuses on the influence of power in all aspects of research. Power and relationships must be considered in the midst of the critical theorists’ research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Critical theory also practices open research assumptions and knowledge of the researcher as she interacts with her informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Critical theory “is critical of social organizations that privilege some at the expense of others” (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 21). Researchers who use a critical theory approach strive to benefit those who are underprivileged and choose to expose the practice of social institutions to replicate the status quo.

Critical theory shares some similarities with feminist theory, which focuses on the role of gender and power in society. Feminism also influences the relationship between researcher and informants (Bogdan & Biklen). This researcher is interested in following the feminist standard of “giving voice” to the informants of the research. Therefore, I followed a feminist approach when working with the study informants.

The idea of “giving voice” to informants is not without controversy. “From the moment the researcher engages in the research project… the voices of the participants have already been interpreted” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Since a qualitative
researcher chooses selections from transcriptions and edits to fit her research, the research fits the researcher’s identity in many ways (Motha, 2009). Giving voice really gives power to the researcher, which is one of the complications of qualitative and feminist research. I have strived to honor the opinions and personalities of the girls I have interviewed in this research, and tried to “give voice” to them with integrity.

Critical race theory is an important element of critical theory. Critical race theory is a fairly new form of critical theory, which began in the legal community. Derrick Bell, a legal activist, is credited for being one of the first to explore critical race theory in relation to people of color and their experiences with the legal system in the United States. Since the 1970’s, critical race theory has made an impact in educational theory and research as well as other arenas (AALBC Online).

The key parts of critical race theory research are the centering of race as a focus, skepticism of the liberal approach, and an emphasis of the voice and experience of people of color (Bergerson, 2003). Liberal approaches, including the idea of “colorblindness,” actually dismiss race as an important discussion point. Part of centering of race is including whiteness as a race. Seeing only other colors as races makes white the norm and every other color only exist in comparison to the norm (Bergerson; Williams, 2004).

Like all other forms of critical theory, critical race theory is committed to the fight for social justice (Bergerson, 2003). One way to commit to this is through pedagogy of altering curriculum and stories to include race. Altering stories are often called counterstories, and can be defined this way: “an alternative or opposing narrative or explanation” (The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, 2009). Critical race theory really fits researchers who have counterstories of their own, which excludes white
people because they are members of the dominant culture. However, white crit has become an alternative method of white scholars who are interested in exposing the challenges of racism (Delgado & Stafancic, 1997).

This researcher strived to give voice to the female students who have been historically underprivileged in American schools. In feminist theory, “giving voice” has tended to voice white women more than black women and girls (hooks, 1994; Strivastava, 2005). In this study, specific attention was given to a critically feminist approach of giving voice to all girls interviewed.

Critical Literacy Theory and Its Use in Research

Language means power. Humans have understood this since the inception of language. Historically, throughout the world and in the history of the United States, conquering countries have sought to destroy the language of the culture being dominated (Rockwell, 2005; Nicholas, 2005; McDermott, 2005). Every social system has a dynamic relationship between the people within it at all times. Power is a big part of this dynamic, and language is a big part of this power (Gee, 1990; Rogers, 2003). Therefore, a critical examination of language and power, both academically and socially, is important to this study.

Just as critical theory views the world and its social institutions through power relationships, so critical literacy theory, also known as New Literacy, views language and literacy through the power and relationships associated with it. Traditional discourses about literacy have focused merely upon the acquisition of skills (Gee, 1990). Critical literacy recognizes the socio-cultural and political process associated with literacy.
Critical literacy, like critical theory, takes into account the historical context and cultural implications of literacy practices within social systems.

Teachers are frequently unaware of discourse issues in education. Canadian research shows that teacher candidates have been found to negate white capitol when presented with it (Solomon et al., 2005). Students from dominant discourses have a hard time seeing literature characters from non-dominant discourses through that character’s lens. The literature does not translate to real life for these students (Dressel, 2005).

Discourse research around language found differences between upper class and working class teens. Views of the future were quite different: Upper class teens both acknowledged and denied their privilege, maintaining amelioratous view of society—that anyone can make it. Upper class teen’s views were tied to academic and social success. Working class teens are tied to daily survival (Gee, 2000).

One part of critical literacy is the notion of language and power. Critical Literacy theorists and researchers do not believe that literacy is simply made up of the skills of decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Literacy is an interaction of the individual’s skills with language and that of the environment and the powers controlling the environment.

Literacy is a part of every human being’s life. Formal academic literacy, like that which has been traditionally considered literacy, is but a small fraction of the literacy that affects people every day. Literacy is as much a social function as it is an academic function (Case, Ndura, & Righettini, 2005; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Dutro, 2002; Finders, 1996; Faulkner, 2003; Gee, 1990, 2000; Hall, 2007; Hicks, 2002; Jocson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Landis, 2003; McCarty, 2005; Rogers, 2003; Weinstein, 2007).
In this study, literacy is equated with critical literacy theory. Focus upon literacy included a systemic view and is told from the point of view of the informants. The research allows discussions about the power issues the informants perceived, both academically and socially at school.

Discourse Theory and Its Use in Research

"Discursive mismatch is often referred to as a lack of alignment between the culture, language, and knowledge of working-class students and dominant institutions such as schools and other social institutions" (Rogers, 2003, pp. 4-5). A key part of critical literacy is the notion of discourse. For this research, James Paul Gee’s theory of discourse was used to analyze the experiences of low-income girls in one urban middle school. Discourse, according to Gee, comes in two parts: Discourse analysis (with a capital D), which is a key part of critical literacy, and discourse (with a lowercase d). Both are extremely important in the lives of all students and in fact for all people in every social situation (Gee, 1989).

According to Gee (1989), discourse is a part of Discourse. "Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (p. 6). A person’s Discourse is a “sort of ‘identity kit’” (Gee, 1989, p. 7) people carry with them that tell them how to act, what to wear, and how to talk in order to fit in with a particular group or situation. A person has to know how to behave and speak in order to meet the expectations of a particular Discourse and a membership in a particular group (Gee, 1989; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Rogers, 2003). “I call such integral combinations of sayings-doings-thinkings-feelings-valuings “Discourses”” (Gee, 1990, p. xv).
Within the context of a Discourse lies the concept of the discourse with a lower-case "d". The term discourse in the lower case refers to the use of language in a person's identity kit. The idea of looking at discourse in schools is contrary to the idea of teaching students one correct way of using language and words in school.

Schools are academic institutions. Like any other institution, schools have systems in place within them. These systems include norms, procedures, and expectations, many of which are not overtly taught. Schools, reflect the people that run them and the people in power within them.

In America, schools are generally run by middle-class, white adults. The students they teach, however, are not generally middle class, and many are not white. During the 2003-2004 school year, 60% of students were white, 18% were Latino, and 17% were African American. That same school year 83% of teachers and 82% of administrators were white, 8% of teachers and 11% of administrators were African American, and 6% of teachers and 5% of administrators were Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006 b). In the state of Iowa, during the 2008-2009 school year, the minority population of student in the state was 15.4%. The minority population of public school teachers was 2.0% (Iowa Department of Education, 2009). The mean income of a teacher in the United States in 2003-2004 was $44,400, easily a middle class income (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006b). Because of this, schools are run in a manner that is comfortable for and reflective of white, middle class rules, habits, and expectations. Much of the way the system is set up is never reflected upon.

Students without the discourse to do well in a school setting eventually fall behind the students who do have the academic discourse at their disposal. "It is one of the most
robust results in educational research that if you undermine someone's motivation, hurt their self-image, and destroy their trust in teachers and schools, they will eventually be less good at and less interested in learning (at least, what the school has to offer), and, indeed, on average, will do much less well than those whose motivation, self-esteem and trust have not been destroyed" (Gee, 1991, p. 9). This is the eventual result of the clash of school discourse with the discourse of students from different lived experiences. However, critical literacy and an understanding of the Discourse and discourse of students allow for ways to use literacy as doors into the lives of students and the issues on their minds (Weinstein, 2007).

"Discourse practices...are embedded within an intricate system of social, cultural, political, and economic relations" (Gruber & Boreen, 2003, p. 5). A school is a part of a larger school district, which is related to other social systems such as families, human services, and community agencies within the larger system of society. All of the Discourses are interrelated and affect the school and its students. For instance, in schools with students from diverse families from diverse backgrounds and differing economic situations, middle class parents tend to look out for their own and run the school (Kroeger, 2005).

In addition to understanding Discourse and discourse, it is important for critical theory researchers interested in literacy to understand that discourse at home and discourse at school may or may not match. Language used at home is considered a primary discourse for students (Gee, 1989). Some students have the use of their primary discourse. However, some students use a secondary discourse at school because the school discourse does not match their primary use of language. Additionally, the
secondary discourse is society’s dominant discourse. Students switching their use of language between home and school face extra work compared to students who use the same basic language patterns in both places.

Adolescence, Adolescents, and Middle Schools

Because the informants in this study are adolescents, research about adolescence in general is relevant. In recent years, adolescence has become a time noted for the vulnerability of the people living in it. One in four adolescents is “extremely vulnerable to multiple high-risk behaviors and school failure” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 8). “For many young adults, the transition from elementary school to a less supportive middle school environment is associated with a decline in self-esteem” (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Adolescence, which currently is more protracted than in the past and filled with greater dangers, presents specific needs. Adolescents have a strong need to belong to a valued group, have reliable relationships, and a sense of worth (Hamburg, 1986). Adolescents in America at this time are generally more tolerant of risk and view risky behaviors differently than other groups (Muuss & Porton, 1998b). Early risk taking equals more serious consequences (Muuss & Porton, 1998b). Curriculum in schools does not actively addressing resiliency skills with supporting adults. (Muuss & Porton, 1998a). According to Janisch and Johnson (2003), increased professional discourse and higher expectations yielded better results for at-risk labeled learners.

Middle schools have the potential to “recapture millions of youth adrift” (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 8). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued *Turning Points* in 1989 and suggested many
improvements for middle schools and the students they serve. Large concerns linger for adolescent students well after *Turning Points*.

Every day, middle schools students are “at risk” for participating in dangerous behaviors just because they are adolescents (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006). “Social upheaval reworks relations between parent and child, teacher and student, and early adolescent and early adolescent” (Bunting, 2004, p. 146). How well students’ schools meet the individual needs of students is extremely important.

Middle schools and society in general must also be concerned about adolescent health and safety. School connectedness has been shown to provide protectiveness against suicidal involvement, cigarette use, violence, frequent alcohol use, and marijuana use (Resnick et al., 1997).

The use of the modern middle school is relatively new, and it is used mainly in industrial nations. In other periods of history and in other cultures currently, adolescents have not spent as much time together. Instead, they spent time with adults of the same gender and contributed to society through work (Schlegel, 1995). Adolescents in modern day America spend little time with an adult mentor or apprentice, and instead are with other adolescents all day long (Aries, 2001).

Middle school students move from the safety of the elementary school to the complex middle school, generally in sixth grade. Most of these students are eleven years old. They go from walking in lines from their one teacher’s room to changing classes at least every hour. Middle school students’ sense of belonging at school declines between spring of the sixth grade year and spring of their seventh grade year (Anderman, 2003). Middle school concepts such as teaming, looping, and advisory programs may help to
alleviate this stress, because “relationships matter” (Jackson & Davis, 2000) in middle schools.

Middle school best practice literature calls for personal attention for students (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1989; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006). School bullies report receiving less teacher and school support than other students report receiving. What is more, victims of bullies report receiving little peer support and wanting it more than other students (Demary & Malecki, 2003).

Middle school is a time of upheaval in the lives of many students and their families. Every student who comes to a middle school must find a way to jockey the hallways, the cafeteria, the academics, and the start of romantic feelings. Much of what happens at school has more to do with the social pressure students are feeling than the academic pressure. Gender, race, and social class all play into struggle. Many times students who are not quite capable of “making it” in middle school, suffer more because of their inadequacy at “accessing the codes necessary” to succeed outside of what is natural to them (Mahar, 2001).

Middle school students are no different that other humans in their uses of literacy, except that these students use literacy through the adolescent lens, that of a person growing from child to adult. This places these students in a specific social space and therefore the use of literacy, both academically and socially, is specific to the life space of the individual.

In middle school, it is common for students to be divided for literature and reading classes. Students who perform poorly on standardized tests, and are therefore considered less than proficient, are generally seen in classes based only on improving the
basics; this means decoding, comprehension, and fluency. Students who score more proficiently are allowed into creative, challenging literature classes that focus on problem-solving and thinking skills. The second classes tend to be more student-directed and generally more enjoyable for students (Williams, 2004a; Gee, 2005).

In addition to academics, behavior expectations play a big part in the middle school experience. Like in academics, Discourse plays a part in understanding the middle school system. A behavior code expectation for adolescents is part of one such Discourse (Mahar, 2001). Social discourse can be very difficult. Students carry different identities into class and they switch between them; debater, athlete, weak student, strong student, thespian, popular kid, etc. Choice and constraint both play parts in students going back and forth between identities (Godley, 2003).

Professional educators who work with middle school students are charged to do much with these students. They are expected to have a rigorous and relevant curriculum, create lifelong learning, understand the age group with whom they work, and provide a safe and healthy place for kids to learn (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These expectations exist because we need great schools for adolescents “as a matter of social justice and national economic self interest” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 15). Middle school educators, when they are doing what is needed, are doing their part to save the world.

Women and Girls in Society

In all areas of society, women and men lead gendered lives (Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). Research of adults in a variety of areas supports this opinion. For instance, in one study of college age adult males and females, participants were asked to list stereotypes about their own gender. Women listed twice as many negative stereotypes about women
as men did about men (Oswald & Lindstedt). Men rate their physical traits generally positively. Women rate their physical traits as generally negative (Oswald & Lindstedt, 2006). Overall, women tended to be harder on women. Additionally, research shows that women, world-wide, have a statistically significant lower level of self-esteem (Kling & Hyde, 1999).

Gender roles tend to play out in society as a whole. Adolescent girls read magazines that show women and girls in quite traditional roles, including a focus on appearance and getting a man (Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998). Advertising campaigns, computer clip art, and children’s stories are all found to be severely biased against girls and women; men are shown as the ones who make decisions, who have a variety of career choices, and who purchase expensive items (Yanowitz & Weathers, 2004).

Additionally, income is still distributed differently between women and men. Despite steps in the right direction, women still make less money than men, even when compensating for other variables (Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter, 1999). Gendered work for women continues to be relational and about family. What is happening in society makes its mark on American girls.

To be a girl in American society is sometimes shameful. One study found that Michigan students who were asked what life would be like for students in the opposite gender, 95% of boys found nothing good about being a girl as opposed to 58% of girls with the same question. One student said “I would kill myself right away by setting myself on fire so no one knew” (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 84).
The view of adolescent girls by American society is less than positive. Media coverage in the mid-to late 1990s was analyzed for its portrayal of adolescent girls, framed girls as “they.” Generally, it was found that girls were portrayed as in crises and in need of adult intervention. Girls were rarely quoted in the articles. Instead adults of authority spoke for the girls about the adult intervention that was needed to save these girls (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007).

Girls and Boys in Middle School

There are some biological differences between genders in general. It must be noted that general differences do not translate to specific differences between individuals. Girls’ brains tend to be designed for multi-tasking, which makes them more able to engage in complex, rational thought. Boys tend to be more right hemisphere dominant, which explains an historic preference for boys to math (Kommer, 2006). However, it is important to remember the social aspects of gender, as well. Media pressure, societal pressure, and peer pressure affect both genders.

There is much debate regarding the way girls and boys are treated in school. Some studies found that boys are the gender that suffers in school. Girls tend to be more positive about school than do boys (Gentry, Gable, & Rizza, 2002; Nichols & Good, 1998). Boys also report being bullied more than do girls (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Socially, boys feel pressure to appear male (Dutro, 2002).

Other research shows that it is indeed the girls who are overlooked in the education system. Girls are taught to be silent. Though they start out testing ahead of boys in early elementary school, girls fall behind in all areas, including reading and language arts, an area traditionally considered a girl’s area to shine (Sadker & Sadker,
One study showed that girls feel more belonging in middle school, but boys feel more belonging in high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Adolescent Girls in Middle School

Middle level educators are witness to the difficulty girls have during adolescence. Poised on the edge of adolescence, the girls struggle to keep their balance, retain their authenticity and vitality, and move on to emerge as secure and capable adults. But now so many pitfalls surround them: physical vulnerability, the closing of options, the emphasis on thin, pretty, and popular, the ascendancy of social success over academic achievement, the silencing of their honest feelings, the message that math and science are male domains, the short-circuiting of ability that renders them helpless, the subtle insinuations that boys are really the smart ones (but that they just don’t try). Girls who succumb to these messages are at emotional and academic risk, in danger of losing not only their confidence and their achievement but the very essence of themselves. (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 98)

Both boys and girls suffer to some extent throughout adolescence. Research shows that girls tend to report more empathy and personal distress than do boys their same age. Girls also tend to report less conduct disorder and internalize their distress to a much greater extent than boys (Schonert-Reichl & Beaudoin, 1994).

Casual conversation among middle school students often include insults (Tannock, 1999). Being called a girl is a major insult to boys. However, being called a boy is not an insult to girls. This use of an insult is stressful and limiting for boys (Dutro,
Insults are also stressful for girls who are immediately subjugated as a lesser person due to the fact that being called a girl is an insult.

Some research shows that boys back each other up; this can make it harder for girls. In classes, male teenagers are more likely to be known as “debaters,” students who promote their ideas and argue other ideas. Males as a group have been observed to back each other up while arguing with a female stating an opinion (Godley, 2003).

Students of both genders are at some times affected negatively in schools. While girls score higher on 4th grade literacy achievement assessments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008a), boys “win the race” by outscoring girls in mathematics and reading on the SAT college entrance tests (The College Board, 2003).

“Poor school adjustment is significantly related to increased substance use” (Flannery & Vazsonyi, 1994). This is true of both genders. For girls, school adjustment is the most consistent predictor of female drug use across ethnicity and the only significant predictor for Hispanic females (Flannery & Vazsonyi).

One study found that there were some distinct differences between female urban students who were resilient and those who were not. Resilient girls did not date, were supportive of other girls, were active, and were dedicated to a career at an early age (Reisa & Hebert, 2007).

Middle school girls specifically use literacy as part of their gendered work as they transform themselves during adolescence. Girls, like all people also use literacy as part of their social space. This includes race and culture. Therefore, literacy through the lenses of middle school experience, gender, race and class are all important aspects of this study and the literature and research that informs it.
Is there a way that academic success in literature can lead girls to find social success as well? Seventh grade girls find negotiating middle school to be very complex (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003). Girls often do not find meaning in literature classes (Broughton & Fairbanks). If these classes were to include more personal exploration, would they impact girls socially and emotionally? Female students expressed an appreciation for the ability to share their “lived experiences” as a part of a literature class (Broughton & Fairbanks). DeBlase (2003) found that middle school girls suffer from a lack of critical discussion around gender roles that could quite naturally flow from what they are reading in class: Girls often discussed admiring strong women but seeing themselves bound by patriarchal systems. Literature, along with critical discussion, can scaffold female students’ lived experiences and their literary experiences. The discussion can work to empower the lives of girls through critical discussion (DeBlase, 2003).

Private and public literacies are very different parts of students’ lives. Private literacies and abilities of students often go unnoticed by teachers (Faulkner, 2005). Middle school girls may have private literacy practices, such as an interest in specific books, which they do not share in the public life of school. This lack of sharing is linked to their belief that these practices do not fit the image they are trying to produce (Finders, 1996).

Seventh grade girls have been found to use “underlife literacy” for a variety of personal and social reasons, including self-preservation and as a ritual of excluding other girls. Underlife literacies are literacies used in schools, in this case, between girls, that adults are not aware of. The literacies are a great source of power for the girls and may include notes, text messages, writings in bathroom stalls, etc. These “underlife literacies”
are related to the social and political pressures of being an adolescent girl in a middle school system (Finders, 1996).

The research about girls in school supports the ideas theory that gender-specific work and gender-specific problems are present in middle schools. This researcher does not assume that modern day American schools are much worse for girls than for boys. Research shows good and bad aspects of American schooling for both genders. This research focuses on the gendered views of girls. A similar study could be done for boys.

Research shows that girls, once they reach middle school, are constantly aware of their bodies (Pipher, 1994). Girls report a higher body objectification and body shame that do boys even as young as eleven years old (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007). Girls also report higher levels of depression (Grabe et al., 2007).

All girls feel the privilege bestowed upon boys in schools (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). This reflects society as a whole. “Until women achieve full equality in American society, schools will continue to replicate these biases and inequalities within our coeducational classrooms” (Diaz, 2007, p. 52).

Research has shown that girls and boys both need to have the opportunity to learn from research based on gender issues in American schools. Of course, gender is not the only student attribute that affects adolescent girls as they make their way around a middle school. The effects of cultural, socio-economic, and racial influence on middle school girls is also relevant.

Socioeconomic Issues for Middle School Girls

Schools in the United States are run almost entirely by white, middle-class educators (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006b). White, middle-class students
tend to be the most successful in navigating American schools to a successful end. They have better tests scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008a) and graduate at higher rates (Espinoza-Herold, 2003).

Socioeconomic status, in addition to color, affects students in school. In an in-depth ethnographic study, Hicks (2002) showed gendered literacy for an elementary working-class white girl; she valued romance, pleasing the teacher, and being well-thought of by students. The girl struggled with the foreign literacy requirements of her school setting. “While many educators continue to blame children and their families for the difficulties their children face, interviews with parents reveal a range of possibilities that point to the social and political complexities that accompany living in poor urban areas” (Compton-Lilly, 2003, p. 142).

Often teachers are tied to “myths that blame and berate urban families” (Compton-Lilly, 2003, p. 31), which are common in urban schools. Despite the belief that urban parents do not care, are not interested in academics, and are not literate themselves, research shows otherwise; in fact, the opposite is true. These myths have been found to be completely untrue in interviews with urban parents and caretakers (Compton-Lilly).

Class as a topic is often not discussed within the American school system (Hicks, 2002). Assumptions are often made about struggling readers and their motivations around reading. Refusal to participate may be seen as obstinance or laziness. One study of three struggling readers showed these assumptions to be wrong. Instead, silence was used to learn, and in some cases, to protect reputations in the socio-cultural atmosphere of school (Hall, 2007).
Working class students’ expectations often conflict with school expectations. What is expected in school can be so different from what is expected in students’ “lifeworlds” (Hicks, 2002) that students feel they must change themselves as they enter the school each morning. The result of this requirement to change, this feeling that one does not quite fit in at school, that one is constantly trying to figure out the rules of the game academically and socially, is frustrating, humiliating, and downright devastating to some students (Hicks).

Parents and students from lower income families believe the dominant discourse that educators believe and teach. They believe that reading is important and a necessary survival skill. This, however, bumps up against their lived-realities, of relegation to the lowest levels of society despite academic and literary success (Rogers, 2003). This is how students with caring parents from the low-income and/or minority may still remain stuck in a “sticky web of institutional discourse that hold them in place despite ample commitment, persistence, and cultural capital” (Rogers, p. 2).

A “fundamental relationship” exists in the United States between family background and student success (Kelly, 2005). Although teachers are generally kind and caring people who want all students to do well, students from working class families are still not doing as well as others in our nation’s schools. According to Hicks, it is “lived moments” that have a great affect on how children later “engage with school literacies” (pp. 19-20). What students know affects how they work with school academics as they go through the school system.

In order to understand the Discourses that low-income girls live, research must be done with girls from low-income families. Collected research and provided findings to
urban educators may result in improved educational experiences for low-income girls. This is the way that urban educators can help girls to do well in urban middle schools.

Racial and Cultural Issues in Middle School

The Carnegie Council (1989) also noted that “the risks that all young people face are compounded for those who are poor, members of racial or ethnic minorities, or recent immigrants” (p. 25). Minority students tend to be found disproportionately in the lower tracks of a tracked middle school, which enforces negative biases for life (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Perceived student prejudice has been associated with emotional distress for adolescents (Resnick et al., 1997).

There are similarities between the ways middle class white students learn and the way their middle class white teachers teach; much more so than between white teachers and minority students (Banks, 1988). This may explain much of the gap in achievement. African American students do not feel as though they are able to contribute to any discussion of race that may come up in school or may feel that race as an issue is never discussed (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Minority students’ schooling reflects the dominant culture’s beliefs about their racial or ethnic group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Knowing this at some level, students may come to see schooling as having to learn white cultures, which can be an unsavory or even dangerous idea (Fordham & Ogbu).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a fairly recent law passed and enforced by the United States government, has huge consequences for America’s marginalized students. According to the Department of Education’s website, African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students are targeted specifically for improvement on standardized test
scores in No Child Left Behind information (NCES, n.d. a; NCES, n.d. b). These three groups of students are targeted as needing intervention, because they do not do as well as their white counterparts on standardized tests.

NCLB is controversial. It puts a focus on accountability on individual schools to improve proficiency for all students. Subgroups of students are getting extra attention in an attempt to close the achievement gap on standardized tests (Irons & Harris, 2007). Low performance and a lack of adequate yearly progress in schools that are not achieving leads to sanctions for those schools (Irons & Harris).

Some educators believe that NCLB is hurting public schools and its students; the NCLB does not address the inequalities in funding that exist in public schools. Therefore, the poorest and most urban schools are punished by the focus on sanctions (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004).

Other research found that textbooks and reading literature often do not use a critical discourse when examining ethnically diverse stories or explaining historical events (Case et al., 2005). Critical Literacy theorists note that literacy is more about background and the ability to navigate a setting than it is about learning rote reading and literacy skills. It is not surprising that those students who come from the same backgrounds as the people in power are able to use their Discourses, their invisible identity kits, to fit in and navigate the terrain successfully. Students, who do not have the same experiences, open their kits and find they are without some of the necessary tools to succeed. In a study of African American students, Ball (1992) found that 100% of study participants preferred a vernacular-based writing style. Latino and White students preferred a more academic style. Academic writing style is the norm in high school, and
therefore places African American students at a disadvantage due to a writing style preference.

Latino students, who generally do not match in race or ethnic background with their teachers, have been found to have the toughest transition from elementary to middle school (Akos & Galasi, 2004). Despite being the largest minority in the United States, Latino students have the lowest educational and economic level of all groups in American schools (Diaz, 2007). Latina girls face conflicting cultural messages, generally low socio-economic status SES, an internalization of negative stereotypes, and high pregnancy rates. A Latina student in the Southwest reported overwhelming feelings of not being wanted at school (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). In her mind, the American school system felt strict, formal, and much less personal and flexible than the Mexican school she attended in her early childhood. Additionally, sensed pressure for rapid assimilation into the language and the habits of the United States (Espinoza-Herold). As a result, she dropped out of school for a while.

Multicultural education has become a trend in the United States. Unfortunately it has not created a deep enough understanding of different cultures in America’s schools. Schools, in need of fundamental pedagogical changes, still suffer from “European Overdose” (Leistyna, 2007). Multicultural education tends to be superficial with no critical analysis of cultural and political implications, and provides no historical context (Leistyna, 2007).

Often students who belong to a dominant culture do not see their privilege. Immersed in their privileged world, they have a hard time seeing another view. Power issues tend to be viewed as anomalies. The same is true with multicultural literacy. The
ability to transfer literature to real life is not easy. “Teachers can work to develop a critical literacy curriculum rather than multicultural units” (Dressel, 2005, p. 762). Without ongoing critical discussion, thoughts about race, gender, and power will be shallow at best.

Compared to past standards, very few Americans today are illiterate. However, we continue to have a “literacy crisis.” The belief across the country is that our students cannot read well enough and must have remediation. “In the United States, the forces for standardization have reached new and alarming proportions, with federal and state policies mandating scripted, uniform, remedial reading programs for students identified as ‘at risk, ‘limited English proficient,’ and ‘deficient in reading skills’” (McCarty, 2005, p. xv). “In an allegedly democratic society, what does it mean that some students are the beneficiaries of ‘real teaching’ and others are not? That some students engage with real literature, whereas others decode stultifying drills?” (p. 300). The result of this push for standardization is that there is a further divide between the educational classes of the dominant culture, who take classes rich in literature, and the dominated cultures, who take classes full of drills, drills, drills (McCarty, 2005). Refining the tools used to separate and grade our students in current American schools, along with a complete lack of discussion of race within our school settings, will not do if we wish to elevate students within the school system (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Tests created by the dominant group in a society tend to test that which is of value in that groups’ social practices. Such tests politicize the learning of marginalized students by showing their “failure” to achieve (Gee, 1990). At the same time, bicultural status is “not valued or considered an enriching foundation but a detrimental condition that
delayed them in their mastery of the dominant culture and language” (Espinoza-Herold, 2003, p. 134).

A dialect is part of a person’s discourse, because it affects the sound of language. Students from non-dominant discourses often have dialects different from Standard American English (SAE). Some students have accents due to recent English language acquisition. Some students have different American dialects.

Dialect is an area that is often questioned by the dominant discourse of white, middle-class educators; they assume that Standard English is correct and other dialects of the English language are inferior (Gee, 1990). This assumption leads to the correcting of grammar of students who are using their own linguistic voice. “Discourse in our society, and, in particular, school-based Discourses, privilege us who have mastered them and do significant harm to others” (Gee, 1990, p. 191).

Like all people, adolescents live multi-layered lives with multiple groups influencing them. One study shows that white adolescents generally have authoritarian parents and many peer groups to choose from, some of whom are academically supportive and some of whom are not. African American adolescents have generally authoritarian parents, but due to their smaller numbers, have generally one peer group to choose from…a group that is not academically supportive. Asian American adolescents tend to have non-authoritarian parents. They also have one peer group, but this group tends to be academically supportive. Latino adolescents tend to have non-authoritarian parents and one peer group who are not academically supportive. The interplay of effects on different races of students influences their academic success in middle school (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).
Schools as a social system within the dominant cultures have been a part of “silencing” minority languages (Nicholas, 2005). Schools have done this throughout history, as they comprise a system that works on behalf of the dominant culture. Both historically and currently, American schools have taken the following stand, which alienates minority students: If it does not fit into the dominant culture, if those in power cannot understand it or feel threatened by it, it is not allowed in the school system. Minority students know the contrast between “us” and “them.” Students from minority groups feel this us/them pull every day as they try to shed a part of themselves and enter the schools created, run, and maintained by members of the dominant culture (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Espinoza-Herold, 2003; Hicks, 2002; McCarty, 2005).

Pressure in middle school can be significant, particularly for students outside of the dominant discourse. For instance, Caucasian children of both genders report much less pressure than do African American or Latino children to conform to societal gender standards. However, for African American students, this pressure did not affect their general adjustment to gender identity. Contentedness with gender in Latino students has been associated with higher internalizing of problems (Corby et al., 2007).

Teachers do not live the lives that their students are leading. Though they occupy the same school, they do so with different purposes and operate from different Discourses. Teachers do not know which students feel that they belong and which do not. Teachers are often wrong when they guess (Nichols, 2006).

It is important for all students to learn the privileged dialect of a society (Delpit, 1995; Gann, 2004). Even if this is not the dialect or discourse that suites one best, it is best to learn it, so one can access it as needed to gain power in life (Delpit, 1995).
Billings’ (2005) research showed that both black and white study participants, who viewed both black and white actors using Black English or Standard English, rated those of both races who used Standard English as considerably more credible. It is important that all students get from their schooling the best possible chance to succeed in the dominant culture. This is especially true given Gee’s assumption that “discourses...give one access to power, social goods, and relative freedom from oppression” in a society (Gee, 2000, p. 96). However, it also helps students to bridge dialects if they sense that their own particular dialect is respected. “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (Delpit, 1995, p. 25).

Urban Middle Schools as Change Agents

Urban schools tend to have a large number of low-income students, often from a great variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Educators sometimes express anger about these “wrong” kids and their bad parents. Blaming parents in urban settings allows educators and society members as a group to deny responsibility for the failure of these students in urban schools (Hicks, 2002).

Urban parents have been found to be extremely supportive of their students in school. Studies found these parents read to their children, took them to the library, monitored and checked their children’s homework, and many themselves were avid readers. Yet urban, low-income parents continue to be presented as uninvolved and unconcerned (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Payne, 1998). “One of the reasons it is getting more and more difficult to conduct school is that the students who bring the middle-class culture with them are decreasing in numbers, and the students who bring the poverty
culture with them are increasing in numbers. As in any demographic switch, the prevailing rules and policies eventually give way to the group with the largest numbers” (Payne, p. 79).

Urban parents often consider literacy a survival skill. Schools also represent this to students as the ticket to a successful and happy life. In her 18 years as an educator, this researcher has heard this assertion made repeatedly by educators to students and parents. Unfortunately, urban, lower-class parents are aware that the ability to read has not panned out into great lives for many of their friends and family members (Compton-Lilly, 2003).

Schools are strong institutions. Children are required to attend them through the majority of their childhood and adolescence. This is plenty of time for students who don’t fit in to “learn to see themselves through the eyes of an institution” (Rogers, 2003, p. 4). What’s more is that it is a generational issue. Parents who did not feel that they fit into the school as students still don’t feel they fit in as adults; they often pass these feelings along to their children who do not feel that they fit either (Rogers).

How do educators, in a school system created and run largely by middle class, white professionals, relate to students who do not have the same background, the same way of interacting in their homes, or the same way of speaking and using language? How much thought do educational institutions and the people in them give to these issues? This is especially important in urban districts.

Positionality refers to people’s many subjectivities in action, and concerns how people engage in the lived experiences/subjective positions of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc. Doing so enables educators to move beyond seeing urban student identity and development as being deviant and oppositional, to
seeing it as strategic and empowering in light of the political and power struggles in which young people engage. (Goldstein, 2007, p. 98)

Schools have historically functioned to sort and separate students. In the past, this was useful to put kids into different life tracks, with some becoming blue collar workers and some becoming white collar workers. Critical educators and critical education systems should move to change this function of schools. “A curriculum organized around personal, social, cultural, economic, and political issues builds a sense of community and belonging, as well as brings the notion of democracy back into the classroom” (Parmar & Bain, 2007, p. 156).

Of course, it is not only in classes that language affects students. Middle school students tend to focus as much or more on social relationships as they do on academics. Language is used in establishing social dominance and a “social code of power” (Mahar, 2001, p. 207). If educators do not pay attention to social language in a middle school, dominant culture and gender issues play out without thought in the hallways and cafeteria as well. Lack of discussion around this issue leads to racial tension and gender inequity (Mahar).

Working with urban students requires specific skills and beliefs (Kincheloe, 2007). Urban students, particularly students of color and students of low socioeconomic status need to have their pain acknowledged. They need to be known as individual people and not feared as “others.”

Who or what needs to change in order for low-income minority girls to have better success rates in schools? White teachers generally tend to think that students need to change to fit the system. Latino and African American teachers tend to think that the
system needs to change if all students are to succeed (Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Urban educators can learn from minority girls in their schools. This research seeks to learn from girls through viewing and understanding their private and public academic and social literacies.

Gender, Race, Culture, and Socioeconomic Status for Girls in Middle School

Gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are not easy to separate when trying to understand the factors affecting the success of urban students (Banks, 1988). Making student aware of these implications is the only way to help students transcend their current status. This includes students of different races and students of both genders. By discussing racial or gender biases and assumptions in literature, students can begin to think about ways to change the rules of the game. Discourse must be explicitly taught for students to understand the expectations associated with them (Delpit, 1995; Brock & Raphael, 2003).

Racial Ethnic Identity (REI) recognizes both racial and gender identity. Oyserman et al. (2003) found that African American girls and boys showed differences in the aspects of connectedness of cultural group, embedded achievement, and awareness of racism. Boys benefited from connectedness to community but this sometimes harmed girls' academic achievement due to community responsibilities outside of school. Girls benefited from an embedded achievement norm within the community. Due to the relationality of being female, identity with relationships could lower achievement for girls due to responsibilities at home.

Girls of color have an additional piece to deal with in the arena of race and culture. "As raced, classed, and gendered subjects, urban African American female
students are multiply affected by racist, sexist, and classist research paradigms and their resulting educational policies" (Evans-Winters, 2007, p. 167). Focus on middle school girls of color tends to be negative and deficit-based (Evans-Winters). African American girls who choose to be academically competent may avoid any other school involvement in order to avoid being teased (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Research with middle school focus groups found little time was given for students to discuss racial or gender issues in school. It also found submerged racial assumptions about people, systemic issues affecting these assumptions, as well as social lives being lived along racial lines, academic tracking, and positioning by stereotype (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005).

It is in middle schools that thoughts about race and gender really start to surface. It is at this time the distinct racial cliques start to form. This is obvious in places like the cafeteria (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Spaces for racial discussions are lacking in middle schools as a whole. Students outside of the dominant discourse must choose to fit in or be empowered by the counter culture, but then be further marginalized (Goldstein, 2007). “In our social discourses, we have primarily and inextricably linked urban youth of color to criminality” (hayes, 2007, p. 199). These students struggle with dominant culture, the subordinated parent culture, and mass culture (hayes). Urban students, particularly middle school students wrestling with the issues of identity development, must struggle with the positive and negative effects of all cultures.

For girls, literacy is important for navigating social experiences. Girls of color are particularly at risk of being silenced. Stories filled with passive women sideline girls and create a “tug of war” for girls in middle school. Girls may resist social and media
pressure to pigeon-hole them, however “this resistance is often caught up within a web of social matrixes and competing ideologies that complicate and problematize girls’ agency and developing sense of self” (Deblase, 2003, p. 635). Research shows a need for girls of color to “compartmentalize” their lived literacies and their academic school literacies due to a mismatch of expectations between the two (DeBlase, 2003). These girls leave their cultural and authentic voices behind in exchange for academic success (DeBlase, 2003).

Teachers have a critical place in the development of girls as they make meaning of their lives. Adolescents in middle schools do with dialects what they do with so many different things. They “try dialects on” (Gann, 2004) as they determine what suits them best. It is an experimental period (Erickson, 1968). In fact, adolescents “are sometimes morbidly, often curiously preoccupied with they how appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are” (Erickson, p. 128).

It is not easy to extract one factor from the others when it comes to academic and social success for students in middle schools. Individuals have individual stories. It remains important to learn from informants in middle schools how to improve conditions for learning from their perspective.

Research Questions for This Study

Urban middle school educators can learn from low-income girls in their schools. In this study, the researcher sought to gain insight from low-income, urban middle school girls of different ethnic and racial makeup. To do this, the study participants' school and social lives were viewed through the lens of private and public literacies in the Discourses of being female middle school students in an urban setting.

The questions this researcher strived to answer are:
1. What are the academic and social experiences of low-income urban middle school girls from low-income families?

2. Do these experiences vary by culture and/or race?

3. In what ways do primary and secondary literacy and discourse practices influence these experiences?

4. Do these experiences lead to lack of academic or social success for the girls?

5. Do the informants’ primary and secondary discourse practice lead to added stress for the girls?

6. What school changes can these girls suggest to alleviate academic and social stresses that the girls experience?

Research shows a need for more information from girls living these experiences right now.
Chapter 3

METHOD

Class relations, gender, and school practices are lived in ways that are fluid, not easily confined to more reductive categories of analysis. -Hicks, 2002

Introduction and Overview

I hoped, through this study, to gain insight and understanding of the experiences of urban, low-income middle school girls from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. To this end, the study was designed to give the most chance for girls to elaborate on issues they consider relevant. Specific attention was given to academic and social discourses from the informants’ points of view.

This study was a multiple case study of seven girls from an urban middle school in the mid-western part of the United States. The participants consisted of two African American, two Latina, and three Caucasian girls. I wanted to study each informant in-depth during her time in middle school. Therefore, a multiple case study model was employed because it matched my purposes: to study individuals deeply (Bogden & Biklen, 2003).

Information was gathered from each informant primarily through personal interviews. Interviews were semi-structured with each girl answering five to ten pre-written questions. The girls were also given some time and latitude to elaborate and take interviews in a variety of directions within the confines of the study’s purpose. Each informant participated in two interviews and an exit interview during her last semesters of middle school.
The focus of the interviews was the lived social and academic experiences of the girls as they attended an urban middle school through the first semester of eighth grade. Girls were asked to reflect upon their interactions with the systems within their middle school through eighth grade and anticipate what high school might be like. They were also asked about their use of language and its effects at school. Girls were also given information kits that included a notebook and a folder for keeping relevant information about school, both academically and socially, to share with the researcher. These were stored in a locked cabinet at the school in my office.

This research followed the model of discourse analysis which “includes both a theory of social life and of language” (Rogers, 2003). “Discourse analysis has the potential to reveal contradictions between various ideological positions and power struggles that permeate the lives of teachers, students, and parents” (Rogers, p. 41).

Data from interviews were checked for validity through the triangulation of data. This triangulation included interview transcript coding, artifact gathering and coding, and checking for understanding with the girls individually as information became relevant.

Purpose

Urban middle school educators can learn from low-income girls in their schools. In order to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of low-income middle school girls’ lives, it was important to look carefully and deeply at a small number of students’ academic and social experiences. I sought to gain insight from low-income urban middle school girls of different ethnic and racial makeup by viewing their school and social lives through the lens of private and public literacies in the Discourses of being female middle school students in an urban setting.
Research Design

Research for this study focused on gathering information related to language, expectations, and academic and social success, as informants interacted within an urban middle school. In order to triangulate, and thus validate information gathered from informants, I gathered information from girls in three ways: semi-structured, in-depth interviews, artifacts; and member checking. These three means of gathering information were selected because it was hoped they would provide rich information about the informants and their academic and social experiences in an urban middle school.

Girls were selected purposefully from the eighth grade class of students at a midwest urban middle school. Students were selected with two criteria. Students’ families qualified for free or reduced lunches by self-report. Students chosen represented a variety of racial backgrounds: Caucasian, African American, and Latina. A total of seven girls were chosen to participate in the study.

School Description

Ramsay Middle School is a school in a Midwest urban school system. The number of students in the grades 6-8 middle school ranges from 550 to 600. The school’s percentage of students in the free and reduced lunch program is 58%. Forty-seven percent of the students at Ramsay Middle School are minority students. This information is as reported by the school district’s website. Ramsay is one of ten middle schools in the school system. The school district had 30,683 students enrolled in the 2007-2008 school year. The school districts graduation rate is 82% according to the district’s website.

Ramsay has a large English Language Learner (ELL) population. Other middle schools do not provide the program and send their students in need of ELL programming
to Ramsay. This population makes Ramsay different from some of the other middle schools in the city.

Student Description

Girls were identified as possible participants by eighth grade staff at Ramsay Middle School. Letters were sent with girls to families. The letters described the study, requested specific study information, and included a permission piece. All girls returning letters received a $5.00 gift card to a local store. Seven girls were chosen for the study by meeting the self-reported criteria of being low-income through use of the free or reduced lunch program at Ramsay and by meeting race identification needs.

All students selected were identified as coming from a low-income family per approval in the free or reduced lunch program per parent report. Race identification came from the self-report families on the permission forms. None of the students were English language learner students.

Interviews

Interviews consisted of semi-structured questions. Although all participants were asked the same questions, leeway was given to informants to take the conversation into areas of interest to them. The purpose of this was to add depth to the information given by the informants. However, when needed, I was able to guide participants in returning to topics related to school.

Three interviews, including an exit interview were given with all informants throughout the end of their eighth grade year at Ramsay Middle School. Interviews were transcribed by a transcriber and coded by me. Students used their own made-up names for themselves during interviews. Only I knew each student’s actual identity.
Confidentiality was maintained through this habit as well as by securing all materials about the study in my office in a locked filed cabinet.

Artifacts

In order to triangulate data, guide the interviews, and add depth to the research, informants were asked to gather artifacts about their academic and social experiences in middle school. Each informant had a folder to keep the artifacts as she gathered them for the researcher. Artifacts included notes, assignments, song lyrics, photo-copied book pages, magazine articles, and internet web-pages. These artifacts were brought forth by the informants as proof of meaningful artifacts in their lives. Therefore, artifact collection was not assigned, just suggested. Artifacts were then coded by me.

Checking for Understanding

In order to triangulate data provided by the informants, I spent time in the last interviews checking for understanding. This completed the triangle and added richness to the study. Member checking took place during the third interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, like data gathering, was qualitative. I coded transcripts and artifacts and checked for understanding with each informant. Checking for understanding was important to ensure that conclusions being drawn from the data matched the intent of each informant. In order to find threads throughout all the data collected, I viewed data across all informants. This provided a richer view of the girls as a whole, and as members of specific sub-groups.
Limitations

The intent of this research was to inform one urban school district. No quantitative data were gathered, therefore, conclusions based on this study do not easily expand to other settings. The results of this qualitative study provided descriptions of the lives of students and drew some comparisons between informants.

Human Subjects Issues

Due to the fact that this study was done with humans, and especially minors, with I followed special precautions to ensure the confidentiality and safety of all informants. Specific information regarding these measures is described in the Internal Review Board application, which was cleared through Drake University and the school district itself.
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

They [teachers] get boring and they just go on and on about stuff. - Amanda

More work...less talk. - Jade

Listen more. - Nikki

They should listen to us more...a lot of teachers...they don’t really listen to us. - Taylor

They [teachers] talk too much. - Yevonne

Introduction

This data collection was done in the spring of 2009 at a Midwest urban middle school. The exit interview took place the second to last day of school. This allowed each study participant to reflect on her entire middle school experience. I obtained the permission of Drake University, the school district, as well as the school principal and of course the girls’ parents and the girls themselves. Protocol for the selection of participants and the collection of the research is attached with the human subjects proposal approved by the three groups listed above.

Selection of Informants

The study took place at Ramsay Middle school in an urban Midwestern town. I worked in this school. Therefore, I was careful to work with girls who had little or no contact with me in my work there.

The girls in the study were chosen purposefully to be eighth grade girls, all of whom were part of the school’s free or reduced lunch program. The principal of the school provided me with a list of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunches in April of 2009. I took the boys off of the list as well as girls in the English Language
Learner programs. I separated the girls on the list of free or reduced lunches by the race they were attributed to in the school's student management system. I then numbered each group of girls and put matching numbers for the girls into a cut. I drew five new numbers for Caucasian girls, five new numbers for Latina girls, and five new numbers for African American girls.

I prepared sealed envelopes containing parental permission slips for each of the fifteen girls. I talked with each of the girls individually. Each girl was verbally told that I was doing a study as a Drake student about the experiences of girls in middle school. I told each girl that she had been randomly selected to be in the study, but that the study was totally optional and had nothing to do with my work at the school. I told them that if they returned the parental permission slip, I would know that they wanted to be a part of the study. If they did not return it, then I would know that they did not want to be part of the study. I would not ask them about it again.

I wanted between eight and ten participants for the study, hoping especially for two or three per racial group. In the first five I sent out, I received three back from Caucasian girls, so I did not need to seek any further for that group. I received one back from a Latina student, so I sent out one more; I could not send out five more, because there were only six Latina non-ELL (English Language Learner) students on my list to begin with. I had decided not to include second language students for this study for communication reasons, and many of the Latina students were in English learning classes. I eventually was approached by a Latina student who was late returning her forms. I allowed her to turn it in late, so I had two Latina students for the study. I received one African American girl's permission after the first five were sent out. I then
randomly selected five more and received permission back from one more African American girl. I ended up with three Caucasian, two Latina, and two African American girls for the study. Parents were asked to report race on the permission slip, and their reports matched what I had seen on the student management system.

All girls in the study returned signed permission slips. The Latina students were given both English and Spanish permission slips; both returned Spanish permission slips. I then met with each girl alone before I began interviews to further explain the study and received their written assent to be in the study.

In the months of April through early June 2009, I met with each girl three more times. The first time consisted of an interview. The second time, we looked at significant written artifacts from their lives and performed an interview. The third time, I reviewed my findings with each girl about what she had said about her experience in middle school and got feedback about my conclusions.

Incentives

As was stated in the parental permission slips and student assent documents, each girl was given a $5.00 gift card to a local convenience store for each visit with me. Each girl ended up with four of these cards: one for returning the permission slip for the study, one for the first interview, one for the second interview and artifacts collection, and one for our final meeting. Additionally, I bought each girl a journal as a final thank you gift for being in this study.

Focus of Interviews

The focus of the interviews was on each girl’s social and academic experiences in middle school. Girls were asked questions about their experiences and observations as a
girl, as a member of a particular race, and as a girl who qualifies for free or reduced lunches. They were also asked about their use of language in and out of school, especially how it might change in school. Additionally, I asked questions about their interactions with adults in the building. Finally, they were given a few opportunities to give suggestions to middle school educators about the ways to improve their experiences in middle school.

The Cases

_Amanda (Caucasian student)._ Amanda was my first interview. Her answers to questions about academic and social experiences proved to be insightful and thoughtful. She was a middle school student who was doing very well in school, both academically and socially, but she still had a lot of ideas about how things could be improved. She seemed to be wise beyond her experiences; she had an ability to see the big picture of the middle school and how it was going well, yet she could also see how adults could improve the middle school experience for girls like her.

In our first interview, Amanda told me that she thought she was a pretty good student and expressed her appreciation for subjects and her thoughts on how well she was doing in these classes had a lot to do with the teacher in the class. She expressed that she was not good at one subject in particular, but upon reflection, decided that it was because this year the teacher of that subject was “not very nice.”

Our second interview revealed Amanda’s academic skills when she showed me quiz scores above 100% due to extra credit and a variety of other academic artifacts revealing excellent grades. She took pride in her academics and had saved many things to show me both from this year and the year before. She pointed out to me the comments
given by teachers on her work, most of which were very positive. It was obvious to me that Amanda appreciated her good school performance and the reaction to her work by her teachers.

Socially, Amanda proved to be very insightful. She felt that her social experiences in middle school had been fine, but she recognized that middle school could be a dangerous place to talk. She pointed out that “you have to watch who you are talking to” at school. Some people will keep your secrets. Some people will spread rumors about you. In our second interview, she gave me an example of “drama” that had started between two other girls the day before in which one girl hit another girl in the stomach saying she was “just playing.” Many girls ended up getting involved and mad about it.

According to Amanda, the girls in middle school, while often supportive, can also be very judgmental of one another, particularly in the area of appearance. She gave examples of comments she had heard between girls involving what they were wearing, including a comment from a friend of hers about how she was finally starting to dress better; a comment that was a backward compliment at best.

Boys, according to Amanda, seem to exist on another plane in middle school. She described a lack of communication with boys often. To Amanda, boys and girls seemed to have different interests and different discussions. She also observed boys to be less academically engaged in middle school than they had been in elementary school.

Amanda definitely noted a gendered experience in middle school. Academically, she felt respected in school. However, she did note that male teachers sometimes treated her differently because she was a girl. According to Amanda, this looked like boys being able to joke around with male teachers in class. Girls trying to joke around with male
teachers would be told to get back to work. She also noted that boys seemed to stick up for each other in classes. Research I did previous to the study agreed with Amanda’s assessment (Godley, 2003). She had also experienced being told that she could not play soccer with the boys by her male peers, though she had been playing since first grade and was in fact quite good at soccer “even in flipflops.”

Amanda, a Caucasian student, noted no racial issues at school during our first interview. During the second, she mentioned that she had seen some name calling between some of the students new to the country and American-born students. Otherwise, she had not seen any problems between races or problems for any of the races at school.

Amanda did see some mild issues related to money at school. These issues stemmed mostly from comments about fashion and why people were wearing what they were wearing. She found these comments annoying.

According to Amanda, adults and the way they interact with students are of utmost importance to the success of students in school. Amanda did feel that there were adults at school who knew her well. She also felt that being known by adults at school was very helpful to her as a middle school student.

Amanda’s main complaint about adults at school, and this was definitely only a certain number of adults, was that they talked too much and did not listen enough to students. Amanda was able to give specific examples of adults in the building who did a good job of listening to kids and treating them like people, as well as examples of adults who talked all class period long, didn’t listen to kids, and were quick to yell at the students.
Amanda had a lot to share when it came to academic and social literacy. When it was time to share artifacts in the second interview, Amanda brought a large number of items to share. Some were academic, showing her success as a student. Some were personal, such as song lyrics and comics that she enjoyed reading and having. Some were political, particularly a pamphlet from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), that we discussed for quite a while. Amanda shared with me that she had recently become a vegetarian and talked with me about some of the reading and learning she had done about animal cruelty.

As far as the discourse of adults in the building, Amanda also noted differences between adults, specifically in regard to the tone of conversations between adults and students. She gave specific examples of adults in the building who talked in a personal tone with her and other students and noted that these adults were more like adults outside of school. She also noted the language and tone of some adults who were much more formal and seemed to be there to work and go home.

Amanda did not feel that she had to change her way of speaking when she came to school other than to not goof around. Although she knew and thought that all students knew the expectations of formal language at school, specifically language free of swearing, she noted that many other students actually used profanity more at school, because their parents were not around to hear them and correct them.

In our last interview Amanda shared with me that she hopes to be a photographer, a chef, or a teacher. She agreed that she had had a good experience overall in middle school. Her advice to the adults that run the building remained the same throughout her three interviews. She thought that if adults in the building would just "chill," many of the
issues between adults and students would cease. She thought some of the adults talked too much, were too loud, and listened too little. Other than that she thought that middle school was much easier than she had expected it to be.

*Gemini (Caucasian student).* The best word to describe Gemini is enthusiastic. She could not wait to share with me what she thought about middle school and her ways of using literacy. Gemini considered herself to be successful, both academically and socially. The artifacts that she brought regarding grades supported the notion that she was a good student.

In our first interview, Gemini shared with me that she had a fairly bumpy start to middle school. It was hard for her to get used to switching classes and having several teachers. Her grades in sixth grade were low, including some D’s. However, as middle school continued, Gemini figured out how to meet the academic expectations of her teachers. As an eighth grader, Gemini felt capable to do all kinds of work. She was even confident about completing big projects that required organization and planning. I asked Gemini how she had managed to change her academic habits to become more and more successful. She attributed it to her own ability to just figure out how to improve.

Socially, Gemini was equally happy. She agreed that she had been in a few arguments with friends, but that they were easily settled. She avoided the mess that she saw some other middle school gets get drawn into. As a matter of fact, Gemini had actually blossomed socially since elementary school, when she was shy and did not talk much with other students. When she came to school she realized “I can talk to these people and …they won’t like not like me.”
Gemini did not see any issues at school related to being a girl. Academically and socially, she thought that the middle school experience was equal for both boys and girls. The only gender-related note she had was that girls and boys were separated socially with girls hanging out with girls and boys hanging out with boys.

Gemini actually reported no problems socially at Ramsey not only by gender, but also racially and culturally. She noted no racial problems in classes or in the hallways.

Gemini reported minimal issues regarding socioeconomic status at school. When asked about comments about the money a student had, Gemini said, “a small number of people talk about other people like that.” She did not see it as a real problem.

In our second interview, Gemini shared a strong use of private and academic literacy. She shared with me a writer’s journal that she had kept since fifth grade, song lyrics that she sang with her friends, as well as a novel she had written. She said, “I’ve written several novels and I wanna get one of them published actually, so I’m talking to a bunch of people about that.” Gemini had a strong link to writing on a personal and creative level.

Like Amanda, Gemini appreciated the positive personal relationships she had with some of the adults in the school. She stated that she had a few. In addition to noting the positive relationships she had with teachers, she also liked that the teachers appeared to be friends with each other as well. However, Gemini did not feel that she was known personally by a lot of adults. She did think that the better the adults know kids in middle school, the better it was for the kids. This was one area that Gemini thought could be improved for kids.
Gemini found the discourse of adults to be generally formal. Other than the few teachers who were closer with her, she thought that generally teachers did interact differently with students than adults outside of school do. One comment she made was that the teachers were here to educate and did not share about themselves outside of their jobs and were therefore different from adults in other areas of her life. Gemini articulated a distance between teachers and other adults in the middle school, but put this down as a part of the system of school. Personalization is not a part of the middle school.

Gemini thought that her language use changed at school only in that she usually spoke in a more formal manner when talking with teachers than when she was talking with friends or outside of school. Her language teacher was the only adult she recalled correcting grammar, and, according to Gemini, s/he always did it in a friendly manner.

Though Gemini did not consider it a drawback, her answers to questions did reflect an understanding of a distance between adults and students at school. Teachers did not share about themselves. She was not well known by many of her teachers. Formal language was required.

Gemini thoroughly enjoyed middle school. She seemed to be completely buffered from any of the negative experiences described by the other participants. She thought that middle school had gone much better than she thought it would. I asked Gemini more than once what advice she would give the adults who worked with middle school girls for improvement. Gemini had no suggestions for improvement, as she had found middle school to be very enjoyable. Gemini left middle school looking forward to high school and fulfilling her dream of becoming a fashion designer.
Jade (African American student). The only word I can think of to describe Jade is amazing. She is the epitome of a self-motivated learner. However, she seemed uncomfortable with me to begin with, and I double checked with her that she did want to be a part of the study. Once we began to do our interviews, she became more and more talkative and revealed to me her incredible insight of the middle school experience.

In our first interview, Jade said she thought she was a good student. In our second interview, when she brought in some artifacts to share, her report card that she brought confirmed her as a good student. She had all A’s for the term!

Jade was the one girl in this study who stated more than once that her classes were too easy. Like Amanda, Jade mentioned that teachers often talked too much in class, which got students off track for the work that they could be doing. She stated wanting more responsibility as well. When reflecting on how she thought middle school would be compared to how it was, she remembered thinking that it would be a lot more difficult than it turned out to be.

Jade shared that she took extra classes at a community center where she had been learning about poetry, singing, pottery and all sorts of things. She counted these as her out of classroom experiences for middle school, as she did not do things after school at Ramsey itself. Jade could only be described as a dedicated, driven, and engaged student, both in school and outside of school.

Socially, Jade thought she got along just fine. She had friends and had no trouble navigating middle school. However, she did not care to be friends with everyone. She said she was not “anti-social,” but she didn’t really care to have lots of friends. She stayed out of the drama at school and had no problems with teachers, other than for minor
things, like talking too much in class. Because so much of what she did was outside of school, Jade may not have appeared to staff to be as dedicated to learning as she actually was.

During her first interview, Jade reported no racial or gender issues at school. However, during the second interview, she gave an extremely thoughtful view of gender in school. She noticed issues particular to being inside classes and outside of classes and shared ways of dealing with them.

Jade noticed academic gender issues. She noticed that topics covered in class tended to be more male dominant, specifically about English or American men. She also noticed that genders were treated differently, and cited physical education as an example. She thought these academic issues were rather minor, but still there.

Socially, Jade also noticed issues for girls, both with other girls and with boys. Girl issues tended to stem from “someone talking behind someone else’s back.” Jade has only a few good friends because of this problem. Issues between boys and girls occurred because “a lot of boys are perverted and they touch a lot.” According to Jade, girls had to endure name calling such as “slut,” “ugly,” and “fat.” Boys did not have to deal with this. These names were not aimed at her because she used a “look” to stop boys or basically avoided boys that she did not know very well or did not seem to have “common sense.”

Jade expressed specifically what many of the girls hinted at. In order to deal with being a middle school girl, it was sometimes necessary to protect yourself one of two ways: stay away from bad situations or stand up for yourself. Amanda echoed this sentiment when she said that students have to be careful who they talk to. Yevonne noted this when she said that girls sometimes were caught defending themselves against insults
and punished for it. No girl in the study mentioned any adult assistance or systemic assistance in dealing with these insults.

Jade, an African American student, agreed that there were racial issues some times, particularly for Mexicans. However, she also noted that not all “name calling” is bad, and it is often used, according to Jade, to tease one another in an accepting way, not in an excluding way. Friends actually used racial terms as a way to include another person. She did note that academically, whites were covered more in classes. She did not feel that people of different races had different opportunities at school or that teachers treated students differently based on race.

Jade was one of three students in this study who did not identify herself as having a close relationship with any adults at Ramsey. She felt that teachers were fairly impersonal and demanding. She also repeatedly told me that teachers talk too much. She gave an example of an assembly, where the adult in the front of them just went on and on about improving behavior, which she considered pointless.

Although Jade did not feel close to adults in the building, she was not sure it was necessary to be close with the adults. She thought they were just teachers in school, not necessary adults in her life. Jade and others reflected a clear separation between adults and students, but accepted this as normal part of the system.

As far as the use of language at school, Jade reflected vague similarities to the other girls. She noted that teachers are different than other adults in her life because they are more formal and talk to students in less personal ways. She noted that one teacher was different because he was more like a “parent or something.” She described him this way, “He gives us a lot of chances, but then he doesn’t, like, let us just walk over him.”
Jade, like Gemini, noted that kids did change their language at school by using more profanity. She thought this happened because their parents were not at school to stop them. The only teacher she noticed correcting grammar was her language teacher, which she thought was appropriate.

When Jade shared her artifacts, she shared an amazing array that she felt really covered who she was. First, she shared a beautiful poetry book that she had made in an after school program. It consisted of pages of a form of poetry she called microcography. The poems were very personal and deep. This was a poetry book that obviously took a great deal of time and work. This was all poetry done NOT for a grade or because it was a requirement. It showed Jade’s internal use of literacy. In addition, she brought in a report card with all A’s to reflect her success in her classes. Last, she shared a detention slip she had earned for being tardy to class. She told me that she included it “because I’m not perfect.” It was obvious to me that Jade had worked hard to give me a full picture of herself as a middle school student.

In our last time together, Jade reflected on how she thought middle school would be, compared to how it was. She decided that it was not as hard as she thought it would be, and that over all, middle school is “kind of boring.” Jade headed to high school ready to go, though wistfully unchallenged in middle school. Her future goals include going to a local college and taking vocal lessons and business classes.

*Nikki (Latina student)*. Nikki entered the study with a lot of enthusiasm. She was very happy to be able to share her story with me. The further we got into the interviews, the more difficulty Nikki revealed having at school.
Nikki was the one student with whom I had the technical difficulty of my recording device not working well in her first interview. I was able to hear about one half of what she said. To remedy that situation, I had to ask her a few of the questions from the first interview again in the second interview. We ended up getting the information we needed in the end.

Nikki had some unique aspects to her as a student. First of all, she shared with me that she had repeated fourth grade and that she thought it had helped her as a student a lot. Second, she was fluent in both Spanish and English. Because of this, she enjoyed the added responsibility that she got in classes sometimes of translating for students who did not speak English very well. She was the only student of the seven to have these two unique aspects to share with me.

Nikki considered herself a good student. She enjoyed math and science the most. She thought that repeating fourth grade in Texas had made her advanced in math, which she really enjoyed. She considered grammar to be a difficult class.

Initially, Nikki reported feeling successful socially at Ramsey, and overall it sounds like she was. However, in later interviews and with further questioning, Nikki shared that the social scene of middle school could be quite difficult. She found the drama among both boys and girls to be hurtful. She thought that it was harder to make friends in middle school than it had been in elementary. Nikki had moved to Ramsay in seventh grade and was new to this school at that time, which may have accounted for some of it. She had not been at Ramsay for her whole middle school experience.

Nikki reported that gender definitely played a role in her life as a middle school student. Particularly socially, she felt the negative effects of being a girl. She reported
dealing with a lot of problems with other girls, including back stabbing and name calling. She noted, also, that some boys used negative names toward girls that were gender-specific and hurtful. Nikki seemed to be bothered by having to deal with these issues. She said, “I don’t really know, because mostly it’s us…the girls that are being picked on…” Nikki did not report a specific way that she dealt with this issue and seemed very frustrated. She did not seem to know who to go to to make this problem better.

Nikki reported some problems with racial name calling. However, she did not indicate that these were aimed at her, and were not taken as personally.

Nikki did notice comments based on financial basics. She described comments about people being “dirt poor” or not being able to afford this or that. When asked if this was bad or enough to be really bothersome, she believed that it was. She reflected that being poor affected her socially at school, more than any other participant.

Nikki stated that she had some adults in the building who knew her well, and that it helped her to have that. She was the one girl in the study who mentioned how it helped her academically to be close to the adults in the building. She mentioned assistance she had gotten and offers of tutoring, which she attributed to the teachers knowing her well. While Amanda and Gemini mentioned more how this helped emotionally, Nikki noted the academic help it gave her.

Nikki, as a fluent Spanish speaker living in a home where Spanish was the main language, definitely changed her language when she came to school. However, she did not find it difficult to switch, and even found it a way to be a part of the school, by helping Spanish-speaking students in classes. She believed that students at school were to
speak “appropriately or mannerly like in a nice way” at school. She did not find that teachers encouraged students to fix grammar problems at school.

Nikki’s shared artifacts were small but heartfelt. They were quotes that she found on the Internet. Her favorite artifact was a quote/poem from the Internet:

I’m not a perfect girl.
My hair doesn’t always stay in place &
I spill things a lot. I’m pretty clumsy &
Sometimes I have a broken heart.
My friends & I sometimes fight &
Maybe some days nothing goes right.
But when I think about it & take a step back
I remember how amazing life truly is
& that maybe, just maybe. I like being
Unperfect…

Nikki spent a lot of time explaining to me how important this poem was to her. It seemed to center her and encourage her throughout middle school and the stress that sometimes came with it.

In our last meeting, Nikki told me that middle school was a lot different than elementary school in that students had to settle down and be more mature. She sensed that it would take even more maturity once she started high school. Her goals included finishing high school and becoming a doctor or lawyer.

*Susana (Latina student).* Susana, like Jade, presented herself as fairly quiet and very together as a student. She had found ways to take advantage of programs in the school that benefited her. She also found ways to stay out of any social mess in middle school.

Susana considered herself a good student. She thought she was good but not “A plus.” She enjoyed her classes in middle school, especially math. In eighth grade, her
favorite class was science. She felt successful over all, seeing writing as her toughest academic work.

Socially, Susana had also found middle school to be a pretty good experience. She had experienced some problems with other girls and rumors at the end of seventh grade, but it had not been a problem her eighth grade school year. She had seen her share of trouble between girls in particular. This always happened in the hallways, and was based on rumors and girls bothering one another about appearance and behavior. She did not notice this problem with boys, who she found to be more accepting and easier to hang around. She seemed to isolate herself from any “girl drama.”

Susana considered the adults at Ramsay to be generally caring about students. She, like Amanda and Jade, thought that adults did talk too much in some classes. However, she had adults that she felt knew her well, and she thought this was important.

Susana, who is bilingual, found it easy to switch back and forth between English and Spanish. She found it easy to speak the language required at school. She thought the change that kids made when they talked at school was to be more of a “goody two shoes.” She had heard teachers correct language, which she found to be a good thing, because it taught kids bigger words. Again, Susana reflected an acceptance of formal, less personal language in school without question.

Susana did not consider her experience to be particularly gender-specific. The only exception to that was the experience she had of being judged on her appearance by other girls, which would not have happened if she were a boy. This experience of being judged was similar to what Amanda described as treatment by some other girls. In classes and socially, she felt that boys and girls were treated equally and fairly. She actually
thought that boys suffered more name calling than girls based on being too weak, too strong, or too scrawny. Name calling about appearance affected both genders.

Susana, a Latina student, did not feel that her experience was different due to race. She did not see racial inequity in classes or socially at school. As a matter of fact, she had many positive experiences in a Latino group after school and a program specifically for Latinas which took her to visit colleges and gave information about scholarships. Susana had taken advantage of programs that helped Latino students and Latina girls in particular. These programs provided systemic support for Latina students, which as a student, Susana could not see as support. Yevonne, a Caucasian student with some Latina heritage, had attempted to be in one of the same programs and felt she was treated differently for being Caucasian. Susana, like Jade, had found ways to take advantage of community programs that assisted her. She had found success amid students who were not having success.

Susana noticed some racial tension between students. However, usually name calling only came up when two students were already angry with one another about something else. Instead of calling names based just on the racial issues, the racial name calling came out only after two individuals were angry or wanted to fight for other reasons.

Susana was also the only girl in the study who had trouble coming up with artifacts to share with me. I was afraid I might lose her as a participant, but she finally brought in some things to share. Most were descriptions of her use of literacy rather than actual documents. This was not because she was an unmotivated person. It was because she was not particularly interested in literacy, especially literacy around emotional needs.
What she did bring was a quote she liked and a written explanation of what she liked to do in school, which was mainly math and science. Her interests when it came to literacy were historical fiction, history, and crime fiction.

Susana did not use literacy for emotional or social reasons, particularly. She did use literacy for entertainment and for academics primarily.

When I met with Susana for the last time, I asked her about her future plans. She was confident that she would attend college. She had an interest in becoming a lawyer, a doctor, or an accountant. She felt that middle school was nicer than she thought it would be. According to Susana, “It’s gone really well.”

Taylor (African American student). Taylor, like Gemini, believed that she came out of her shell in middle school. She described herself as a person who changed from being shy in elementary school to being very social in middle school. She, like many of the girls, also really enjoyed middle school overall.

Taylor considered herself a good student for the most part. She generally did her work and tried to keep her grades up. She, like many of the other girls, also expressed an enjoyment of math class, though she also liked reading and language arts classes as well.

Taylor considered her experience in middle school to be a gendered experience; not so much in the classroom, but in the hallways and in the social scene. She noted that there were issues involving drama between girls, mostly gossip. However, she considered the social issues between boys more serious because boys were more likely to want to fight one another than girls. Between the genders, Taylor noted that “boys get on a lot of girls nerves here.”
Academically, Taylor noted that girls did better in school because of the boys’ attitude toward school. One study agreed with Taylor in that it found that girls’ self-discipline made them better students (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006). She noted that girls learned more because boys “seem to care less than the girls do.” She thought both genders were taught equally but that girls took more advantage of school.

Taylor, an African American student, noted racial tensions at Ramsay, particularly between African American and African students. When asked about racial issues in school, she said, “It’s just not really like between whites and blacks...I think it’s mainly between Africans and blacks and I don’t know why when I feel that we’re the same race...there’s always tension between like that, you always hear someone fighting over something stupid like that.”

Taylor expressed a concern not only for African students, but for all students who were new to the country and struggled in school due to language issues. She felt that these were the only students who lost out on academic opportunities at school, not due to race, but due to language barriers. She did not feel that other races lost out academically or socially at school.

Taylor most specifically expressed concerns for other students, particularly student from other countries. She was not the only one to do this; Amanda did as well. Many times Taylor expressed a sense of empathy for students who were struggling as immigrants to the country.

Taylor noted only minor comments related to income. These comments were along the lines of calling someone spoiled or “rich white girl.” She did not find the issue of income to be a problem at Ramsay.
Taylor, like Jade, the other African American girl in the study, did not feel that she was well known by any adults in the building. She thought it would help to be well known by an adult as it would keep adults from jumping to conclusions about students so quickly.

Like the majority of the girls in the study, Taylor thought that adults at Ramsay would do well to talk less and listen more. She liked teachers that lectured less. She liked teachers who listened more. She even described one teacher who asked for feedback on tests, but then docked grades if the feedback was not positive. However, she also described some teachers that she thought were much better at working with kids.

The discourse of the middle school student, according to Taylor, was based on the fact that middle school kids “think they’re grown.” She believes that discourse among students deteriorates when they are away from their parents and guardians because they cuss and act more disrespectful than they would with their parents there. This followed the thinking of Jade and Gemini.

Taylor believed that adults were respectful to the language style of all students. She noted that some teachers even tried to use the slang that students used, which she found to be funny. She did not notice teachers correcting language other than when a student was cussing, which she thought was appropriate.

Taylor’s literacy artifacts shared were quotes. They were personal quotes about the teenage experience: “Fears, laughter, drama, tears, make the best of teenage years,” and “Your closest friends hurt you the most, not even your worst enemy can amount to that.” She shared with me that she did sometimes keep a quote book at home, although
she did not share it with me. Both of the quotes she shared with me reflect the teenage experience as being emotional and somewhat unsafe.

I met with Taylor for the last time two days before the end of her eighth grade year. She shared with me that her big goal for high school was to keep her grades at A’s and B’s. She had experienced dropped grades from time to time in middle school, and she did not want to see that happen in high school. Her other goal was to do more “work time” than “hang out time.” Her third goal for high school was to enter a special program for fashion design.

_Yevonne (Caucasian student)._ Yevonne’s middle school experience seemed to be the most difficult. Because she seemed to be having the hardest time in middle school, and was honest about what could be done to improve her experience, Yevonne had the most to teach middle school educators.

When I invited Yevonne to participate in this study, she was the girl who asked me the most questions about it. When I explained that I would be interviewing her about her experiences in middle school, she began telling me right then that there was a lot of drama and difficulty in middle school. It was like she needed to tell someone.

Yevonne was very straight forward about the struggles she had in middle school. She is the only girl of the seven that found middle school to be more difficult than she thought it would be. She often found herself near or involved in middle school “drama.” This happened despite her attempt to stay out of it as much as possible.

Yevonne also described herself as struggling academically. She hated math, which was also unusual compared to the other girls in the study. She acknowledged that
her grades suffered because she often did not do her school work and sometimes argued with teachers in class.

Yevonne definitely considered her experience in middle school to be a gendered experience. She found that girls in her school often talked about each other and tried to argue and fight each other. She also felt that boys bothered girls verbally and sometimes physically at school. She noted that she and other girls had been in trouble for a scenario in which a boy grabbed a girl’s body and then the girl hit the boy in retaliation. Girls were generally caught in the act by adults and got in trouble, when the boy was the one who started it. Jade and Taylor also expressed concern about boys touching girls in school.

Yevonne, identified as a Caucasian student, noticed many issues around race at school. She, like Taylor, particularly noted issues between African students and other students, particularly African American students. This included racial slurs aimed at students from Africa. She also noted that some racial groups had clubs. She had joined one club and was treated strangely because she did not look like she belonged. As a white, low-income student, Yevonne could not find the extra support she needed at school. She definitely saw racial issues play out in her middle school every day.

Yevonne was of three students in the study that did not feel anyone at school really knew her. One support staff had helped her, but he left and his position was not filled. She believed that adults knowing their students would really help the students’ in the areas of comfort and success.

Yevonne, like most of the girls, believed strongly that several adults at Ramsay needed to improve their interactions with students. She described some of the teachers as
“straight evil.” She also agreed with other girls that the teachers “talk too much.” She believed that “if they’re going to talk they should make it interesting so then the kids will actually want to do the stuff.” Other teachers she believed did a much better job of listening.

Yevonne expressed a belief that adults needed to be better at dealing with students who were upset. She described an interaction with a teacher she did not know, who had corrected her behavior when she was already mad. She had asked the teacher to leave her alone. What followed was an escalation between the two of them landing Yevonne in in-school suspension the next day.

Yevonne found, like most of the girls, that the language used at school was expected to be more formal than what kids might use outside of school. However, she did not ever notice teachers correcting grammar or language, other than when students were swearing or name calling.

Yevonne often did not complete her work, and therefore had poor grades. She had hoped to do better in middle school and said she would give the advice to younger girls to “not be disrespectful to the teachers and to do your work and stay on task instead of talking to your friends and always arguing with the teachers and getting sent out of the class.” She wished she had gotten this advice when she entered middle school.

Despite her lack of academic success, Yevonne shared a lot of beautiful artifacts. She had quotes from others and quotes of her own all mixed with her own artwork. Her neatly organized quote book was full of personal things, including lists of people she had lost and song lyrics and quotes that were quite emotional. They showed her ability to use literacy to access her feelings about the world around her. These artifacts were not things
shared at school, and I would guess that no adult in the building knew this part of Yevonne.

When I met with Yevonne for the last time, I realized that I was most concerned about her going to high school. Though she was extremely insightful and articulate during our interviews, Yvonne had not had the academic success of the other girls in the study. Her goals included to do well in school and become a lawyer. She agreed that middle school had not been an easy experience for her; she hoped for better in high school. It is clear to me that Yevonne looked for but could not find support in the middle school system neither in a group, one-on-one with an adult, nor systemically.

Questions Answered

When I began this research study, I hoped to accomplish the following: examine the individual experiences of low-income girls in an urban middle school; explore the way gender, race, and socio-economic status entered into these experiences; and look at the way that language and non-verbal communication, particularly with the adults in the school, entered into these experiences. Through these seven cases, and the insight of each of the girls in this study, I found some important information for urban educators to consider when educating low-income girls of various racial backgrounds. I also discovered more than I had anticipated about the need students had to be listened to more and talked at less.

Furthermore, I uncovered three distinct ways that girls seemed to try to get through school. These were consistent with a Brown University (1996) study, which reported three ways low income girls try to survive middle school: speaking out, doing school, and crossing borders (what I would call Discourses) between home and school.
The three ways I found girls “doing school” were to avoid problems, stand up for themselves and scare the harassers. They also tried to get the help they needed within the system. Girls who did one or more of these seemed to feel the most successful in school. Girls who had a hard time figuring out how to do this felt the most frustrated in school.

Girls and Boys are Treated Differently

Each girl indicated that her experience in middle school had a gendered aspect to it. Gemini reported the least issues around gender, only noticing that boys and girls tended to exist separately at school, and that girls mostly hung with girls.

Academics

Amanda, Jade, Taylor, and Yevonne noted gender issues in classes, though they varied by experience. Amanda noticed that male teachers treated girls differently in that male teachers joked with boys, but when girls tried to joke, they were told to get back to work. Jade noted that people studied tended to be male. She also noticed that boys ganged up on girls in classes when there was an academic dispute (Godley, 2003). Taylor noted that girls worked harder in school and therefore did better. One study supported Taylor’s assertion that the girls tried harder and had more self-discipline (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006). Other gender notations by the girls were that boys were asked to carry things instead of girls. Girls could not mess around in class like boys could. Men were more likely to be discussed in classes.

It was clear in the interviews that gender was not a topic of discussion in classes. A few girls clubs were mentioned that may have included discussions about gender issues. Overall, the gender issues being dealt with by both boys and girls were not being addressed in any systemic way within the school.
Social implications

All girls noted gender issues socially. These issues were seen as negative by everyone except Gemini, who reported only a separation between the genders. All the other girls noticed varying degrees of issues between girls themselves involving “drama”: gossiping, judging on appearance, and arguing. All girls except Gemini and Susana reported problems with boys toward girls, including significant name calling and even the boys touching girls. Yevonne noted that often, what she saw and experienced was boys inappropriately touching girls, then when girls retaliated, the girls were caught and got in trouble for hitting or yelling at boys. Both Taylor and Jade explained that they had to be firm with boys to protect themselves or had to stay away from boys altogether.

According to the girls, boys had their own issues at school. Boys endured being called “scrawny” or other names related to appearance. They did not do as well academically in school, and the girls seemed to imply that the boys were essentially clowns.

As research indicates, gender is everywhere in middle school: from the clothes a person wears, to the names a person may be called, to the expectations of some teachers. The girls in this study generally felt they were respected as students. However, girls indicated a certain lack of safeness between girls and between girls and boys at school.

Others Have a Problem with Race But Not Me

In general, the girls did not seem comfortable talking about race. In the first interview especially, girls did not indicate issues related to race. During the second interviews, I was able to gain some more insight, maybe based on better questions, or maybe because the girls were more comfortable with me. In the end, six of the seven
noted some racial issues for varying reasons. It also became clear to me by the end of my interviews that race was not addressed by the school in any meaningful way.

*Other students’ problems.* Three of the seven girls, Amanda, Taylor, and Yevonne, noted issues for immigrant, or ELL students. Taylor and Yevonne especially noticed racial tensions between African American and African students. This included name calling and physical fights between both boys and girls. Amanda, Taylor, and Yevonne expressed sympathy for the experiences of the students from other countries; academically because they could not follow what was happening in classes; and socially, because they, especially African students, tended to be social targets. Four of the seven girls in the study were in a racial minority at school, yet they noticed racial issues of students outside of their own race or culture. An African American student noticed issues for Latino students. An African American and two white students noticed issues for African immigrant students.

*Racial banter as acceptance*

Jade had a unique view of racial issues at Ramsay. She noted social issues aimed at Latina students; however, she also noted positive racial banter. She said she and her friends sometimes teased racially in an accepting way.

*Race in academics—absence of discussion*

Jade was the only student to note that race, culture and gender played a part in what was taught in school. She said that “mostly everything is like...some English man or some American man.” As I asked more questions about race issues in classes, it became clear that race was not a topic of discussion. Topics of study were studied around race. No discussions of racial issues existed in the classrooms.
No systemic support for racial discussions

No student in this study mentioned any systemic or adult-led discussion of race in the school. Girls were reticent to discuss the topic, and when they did, they mostly noticed areas of struggle for other people. Interestingly, the person to express feeling the most rejected was Yevonne; her feelings of rejection surfaced when she described being treated differently for joining a Latino group, but not looking like she belonged.

Finances matter

All but two girls in the study noted social issues based on the perceptions of the amount of money a person had. Generally the issues were minor, came from other girls, and were centered on appearance and fashion. Amanda shared a disparaging comment a friend had made about her clothes. Nikki noted hurtful comments about what she and others could and could not afford. Others thought the comments were generally small and of little impact. In a school where the majority of students qualified for free or reduced lunches, maybe some of the effects of poverty were buffered. Despite being part of the majority, these girls were affected, some more than others, by the comments made about their lack of ability to afford what others have.

Speak Properly in School

Discourse and language use was an interesting area, as the girls seemed to circle around the issue. Most referred to expected school language as “proper” or a synonym like it. They did not think teachers corrected students’ oral language. The only person in the school noted for correcting grammar was the eighth grade English teacher; but those who mentioned it considered that appropriate.
This proper or formal way of speaking, and comments about how adults in school talk and interact differently than other adults, indicated a distance or separation between kids and adults. The girls in the study accepted this as being a part of the school. However, being in the system makes the system hard to see. Does a school system have to promote a formal and impersonal way of talking with its students?

All but two girls reported doing well in classes. All reported a wide variance in their classroom experiences. Many classes were reported to be too teacher-oriented, with the teacher doing way too much talking and not enough listening.

Social Drama

In general, girls found the social discourse of middle school to be more difficult than the academic discourse. All were able to describe some type of “drama” in the hallways and common areas at school. The degree to which this was problematic ranged dramatically. Gemini and Susanna reported very few problems, while Nikki and Yevonne reported enough problems to interfere with their academic progress.

Girls tend to recall teasing about appearance more readily than boys do (Agliata, Tantleff-Dunn, & Renk, 2007). Hurtful, dividing language was common, including comments about appearance, gender-specific slurs aimed at girls, and sometimes aimed at boys. The ability to defend oneself from these conflicts as Taylor and Jade did, or avoid and ignore these conflicts like Amanda and Susana reported doing, seemed to be what separated the girls who felt successful from the girls who did not. Yevonne and Nikki, who described the most pain from social drama, expressed no specific way of stopping what they considered hurtful language and behavior by other students.
It Is Harder for Them

An unexpected theme emerged from this research. Empathy emerged without my looking for it from many of the girls. Many of the girls showed an ability to put themselves in the places they saw as worse off than themselves. Taylor and Yevonne seemed very concerned for English Language Learners in the school. Amanda also reflected this concern. Susana expressed concern for the boys who she thought suffered more insults than girls.

Teachers Talk Way Too Much

Over and over during the study’s interviews, girls expressed that adults in their urban middle school talked way too much and listened too little. It was the most salient item in the research, and though part of the Discourse of school, was not something I expected to hear. Students reported a lot of lecture, very little listening, and much of being talked at in their classes. Teachers who employed different methods of working with kids, like the teacher that Jade described as more like a parent in his interactions with kids, were held in high regard.

Along with the extensive talking came a lack of listening. For all the girls except Jade, this paralleled a desire to be known more personally by the adults. Because teachers were generally viewed as being at school to teach and then go home to their own lives, the girls did not feel they were heard.

There Is a Distance Between Us

Research shows that personal relationships in schools help middle school students achieve (Garcia-Reid, 2007; Suldo et al., 2009; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Davis, 2006; Wentzel, 1998). Of the seven girls in this study, three reported that they did not have a
close personal relationship with an adult in middle school. Both African American students, Jade and Taylor, expressed this, although Jade did not think it mattered.

Yevonne, the one reporting the most trouble getting through middle school, also had a hard time naming a close relationship. The one person she did have a relationship with had left and not been replaced.

Middle school students need to have a voice at school. Many of the girls, though generally satisfied with middle school, reported that adults did not listen well to students in classes or outside of classes. Some thought this would be a way that schools could improve.
Chapter 5
Summary, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

*The teachers just need to “chill”* - Amanda

Summary

The girls in this study had one thing in common: They all qualified for free or reduced lunches based on their families' incomes. The study consisted of two African American, two Latina, and three Caucasian girls. Each girl had a unique experience although there are some similarities from which urban middle school educators can learn.

Each girl in the study explained how she had experienced middle school both academically and socially. In each explanation, I got answers about how each girl was able to deal with the middle school experience. Sometimes they had to learn to fit the system. Sometimes they relied on relationships with adults and peers. Sometimes they had to stand up for themselves. Sometimes they had to figure out how to avoid problems.

Conclusions

Academic experiences varied widely based on the skills of the girls and the specific teachers in classes. Some examples about academic experiences were positive. Jade mentioned one math teacher who she considered good at interacting with students. He acted in a parental way, with respect, but the kids knew they couldn’t run over him. Amanda mentioned a social studies teacher she thought did a good job of making things fun. Some examples about academic experiences were negative. The main complaints were that classes were often boring and that teachers talked too much.

The majority of the girls in this study felt fairly or very successful in school. They had ambitions to do well in high school and to have a career. Yevonne was the one girl
who did not feel that she had done well in middle school classes. However, she still had hope for high school, and planned to be the valedictorian of her class.

Social experiences also varied among the girls, although there were some similarities. For instance, all girls were able to think of a time that they felt social stress at school. All were also able to describe middle school “drama” that they were either a part of or were witness to. These instances revolved around rumors, arguments, and fights.

The range of the pain these social experiences caused each girl was wide. Gemini seemed the most immune to bad experiences. She was not aware of name calling of any kind or of issues between different groups of students. Yevonne and Nikki were the most affected by this drama, and expressed first hand pain from the rumors and problems they felt were directed at them. It was clear in these interviews that, as a whole, the social experiences at Ramsay were more stressful than the academic experiences.

The Discourse of the school was more apparent to me as the interviewer than to the girls who were in the system. Many of the teachers were considered wonderful by the girls. However, the school in general used what I would describe as a Discourse of Distance. School language was formal. Teachers did not know kids personally. Teachers were generally kind, but adults did most of the talking and little listening. All of the girls in the study accepted this as normal, with the exception of Yevonne, who had higher expectations for the adults in the school.

Of the girls interviewed, Jade, Gemini, and Amanda seemed to feel the most successful academically. They all shared information from teachers that showed that they were good students. Jade had a report card that had with all A’s. Amanda shared returned classroom assignments with positive comments and good grades. Gemini also shared
academic work. Gemini revealed that sixth grade was rocky, but once she got middle school figured out, she did well.

Taylor and Susana reflected a varied academic experience. Their grades fluctuated. Nikki also reflected a varied academic status.

Yevonne shared that she felt that her academics were poor. It is obvious to me, after spending time interviewing her, that Yevonne is an extremely articulate and insightful young lady. Her lack of success cannot be explained by a lack of intelligence. It just seems that school overwhelmed her. As a result, she did not get work turned in, she argued with some of the adults in the school, and she got caught up in “drama.” This is a young lady who did not feel well known by teachers and referred to some adults in the building as “straight evil.”

The girls did not directly state that they were stressed about the formal discourse at school. However, many stated that adults in the building interacted differently with them than adults outside of school. Teachers were more proper, more formal, just here for work. Adults outside of school were more personal and casual.

In general, the girls did see room for improvement in their middle school. They all had the same thing to say about how to improve the school: adults need to stop taking so much and listen more.

Future Research

Many studies could be done to add to this study. For instance, a similar study could be done for boys. A study could be done with girls who do not qualify for free or reduced lunches to compare differences and similarities between the two populations.
This study could be replicated in another urban school or a suburban or rural school for comparison purposes and to give further depth to the conclusions of this study.

This researcher did not attempt to study immigrant students. However, some feedback from the American-born students in this study revealed that immigrant students were suffering in this middle school setting, both academically and socially. A similar study could be done to view the needs of girls and/or boys new to this country, particularly students from Africa.

Implications for Educators

Two implications for educators are clear from this study. One addresses individual teachers and the institutions that prepare them. The other involves school leaders who set the tone of a building. Both are key to improving the educational setting, not only for low-income girls, but likely, for all students.

First of all, individual educators and institutions preparing educators must take this information and apply it to their work with students in their school. In my 19 years of education, I have rarely encountered listening being promoted as a teaching tool. According to the girls in this study, some teachers listened, some teachers did not. Some teachers talked all class period, some did not. That could easily be a thoughtful portion of lesson planning. It could easily be addressed in colleges that prepare future teachers. “Am I giving my students voice in my classroom?” That is a question to be answered on a daily basis by urban educators.

Second, school leaders must have a vision for their schools that include listening to all students about relevant topics in their lives. They must also consider the important human aspects of a school such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status in their
delivery system. "Are we providing a systemic approach to personalization in schools? Are we providing opportunities for students to discuss issues of race, gender, and personalization?" These are questions that must be thoughtfully addressed by our school leaders. The term *No Child Left Behind* should not be just about test scores, but also about the human beings behind the test scores.

Education is a human field. The Discourse of Distance must be addressed in any school where students do not feel known and do not have the opportunity to discuss the important issues on their minds. My hope is that this research will inform the school in which the study took place, the district the school is a part of, and all urban educators that seek a better educational environment for their students.
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Appendix

Interview Questions

First Interview

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe yourself as a student?
3. Has your school experience changed since you came to middle school? If so, how?
4. What kinds of assignments and class activities are easy for you? Which are hard for you?
5. How do you like to learn?
6. Which classes and activities have matched your favorite way of learning best?
7. How would you describe yourself socially here at school?
8. Has your experience with other students changed since you came to middle school? If so, how?
9. What have been some of your best experiences outside of the classroom during middle school?
10. Have you had any bad experiences outside of the classroom during middle school?
11. Do you think being a girl affects your during your classes at school?
12. Do you think being a girl affects you socially at school?
13. Do you find that adults at school talk and interact in similar ways as adults talk and interact in other areas of your life? Is their way of talking the same?
14. Do you change your way of talking when you come to school? If so, how does it change?
15. Do you find that race matters at school? Why do you think that?
Second Interview

1. (Look at artifacts individually and talk about significance)
2. In your classes, how much time do teachers spend talking? Do you think this is the right amount of time?
3. Are your classes interesting?
4. Are you given enough responsibility in classes?
5. Have you been encouraged to share your favorite ways of learning?
6. Describe the middle school “drama” you have seen.
9. Is there any negative name calling based on being a girl? Boy?
10. Is there any negative name calling based on race? Family finances?
11. Are there adults in the building who know you well?
12. Would it be helpful if adults know you and other students more personally?
13. In classes, do books and teachers cover work of women and men fairly and equally? Are social opportunities equal for girls and boys at school?
14. In classes, do books and teachings cover all races fairly and equally? Are social opportunities equal for all races at school?
15. Do adults at school have equal expectations for girls and boys?
16. Do you think there is an appropriate way to talk at school? How is it different than outside of school?
17. How do adults talk and communicate at school? Can you think of anyone who is different than other adults?
18. Do teachers correct language of kids in classes or the hallways?
19. What advice do you have for MS girls in the future?
20. What advice do you have for MS teachers and administrators?