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## Girl Talk: Analyzing Discourse Among Urban Middle School Girls

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GIRL TALK: ANALYZING DISCOURSE AMONG

URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS

BY

CAREY DELAUDER BLEDSOE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

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2013

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION  
OF  
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2013

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is a qualitative study of an all-girls' advisory in a co-educational, urban middle school located in a mid-sized city in the northeast. The advisory group met daily over the course of the 2010-2011 academic year. Drawing from data collected over one year of fieldwork--including participant observation, analysis of discourse, dynamic interviews, and the analysis of social constructs --this study explores how a group of mostly African American and Latina students created a caring community in order to increase their academic and social success.

Each chapter of the dissertation examines the challenges and obstacles the girls in the advisory group faced in their daily lives, and how they worked together to overcome them. I begin by exploring the social constructs of gender, race, and class that are prevalent to the girls within the advisory group. I then explore the importance of building an effective and authentic advisory program to create a community grounded in care as well as my role as the advisor of this community. Here, I also explore how the girls in the advisory group began to negotiate their understanding of academic "success", namely how the girls grew to use their voices and advocate for themselves and others in order to achieve greater academic success. Furthermore, I discuss why

accountability to the teacher and the group led to academic and social growth for the girls in the advisory.

I argue throughout the dissertation that an all-girls advisory provides the caring environment that enabled the girls to experience greater academic success. This study offers a perspective on how an all-girls advisory group empowers the girls within the group while providing them with the tools necessary to negotiate their daily lives. I also argue that the teacher student relationship is essential to the success of the advisory group and directly linked to the girls' academic and social growth.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Personal History: School and me**

My interest in education as a system of privilege began at a very young age. I was one of the many students distanced by my education. I did not understand the system of education or how it impacted me as a learner and, more importantly, as a person.

Growing up in the inner city school system, I was always one of the top students in my class. During my high school years, my family moved to a suburb outside of the city; here is where I first experienced discrimination. Moving from an urban school to a suburban school seemed like the right move, a better education which would lead to greater experiences and options for my future. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

During my freshman year, the new school system deemed that my inner city education was not equal to the suburban education of my peers. It placed me in a lower track despite my high grades in the classes as well as my ninety seven percent proficiency scores on standardized tests. I remember on my first day of freshman Biology the teacher started the class by saying, “This does not matter. None of you will ever go to college.” What? Where had my family moved me to and why was I already being labeled? I was fourteen years old. I had dreams and ambition. How could this teacher judge me without knowing my capabilities?



Coming from a working class family, my parents' response was that "the school knew best" and if the teachers thought I should be in that class then that was that. My parents did not know the politics of school. They did not know that you could question the system and fight for what was right for your child.

At this young age, I knew this was an injustice; I could name it and knew I had to fight the system. I remember, September of 1990, going into the guidance office and scheduling a meeting with my counselor. He was an older, middle aged white man who really was not interested in meeting with me. I expressed my concern and talked with him about what the teacher had proclaimed on day one of Biology. The response was less than satisfying. I was told to prove myself and maybe next year they would put me in a higher track. I gladly accepted the challenge.

Despite the odds, by my senior year, I was in the highest track the school offered and earned credit for three college courses. I knew that my situation was different. I was headstrong and not willing to listen to what the system had decided was best for me. This determination paid off but it made me an outcast among my peers. They did not understand why I cared so much about the classes I was assigned or why I had the desire to fight the system. It also made me wonder how many other students were in the same situation as I was in and how many of them would speak up and question the system. I also wondered why my urban education was looked at through a negative

future which included college. I wanted to be more than this teacher gave me credit for and less understand how one school system could put itself above others, even when standardized tests were supposed to be measuring the student's success on an equal field.

From high school, I entered a mid-sized college in New England. As a Zoology major, I was exposed to college level math courses. I loved the intensity of the mathematics classes and decided to pursue a minor in mathematics.

I remember sitting in my Difference Equations class and looking around the room. I was one of ten students in the room, and the only female. This was the first time I saw this dynamic in a college course. I remember some of the men in the class looking at me and wondering what I was doing there. They had all been in math classes together and had never seen me before. At first I was intimidated, wondering what I had gotten myself into. Maybe I was not smart enough to be in this classroom? Maybe the students' strange looks were justified? And maybe I was in over my head?

Once the class began, the professor introduced me to the engineering cohort and explained who I was and why I was in the class. At the time, I was involved in a population study on flour beetles using difference equations to map their growth over time and predict future populations. Interestingly, the professor felt it was important to explain this to the class. At that moment my nickname was born, "Flour Beetle." The name made me uncomfortable. It had felt as though the students were trying to make sense of me being in this high level math class with them. The name was cute, and belittling at the same time. It made me feel less important in the classroom, yet I did not speak up and ask them to use my real name. Why had I allowed this name to

stick for the whole semester? Looking back, I wonder what their reaction would have been if I stuck up for myself and asked them to just call me Carey. I was not being my authentic self and felt disempowered in this setting. Was this sexism?

It wasn't until I graduated from college that I truly reflected upon my education. I was not happy with the system that educated me. I felt uncomfortable, disempowered, was subjected to classism and sexism. I knew at that point, I needed to go explore and understand the educational system. I enrolled in an MAT program at an Ivy League university in New England and began my journey into understanding the system that had, in many ways, failed me as a learner and as a person.

### **Discovery**

As an MAT student, I was exposed to great thinkers such as bell hooks, Lisa Delpit, Debra Meier, Paolo Freire, and Ted Sizer. This was my first ah-ha moment. I began to negotiate my own understanding of education and name the injustices I was exposed to in my youth. Although, at this time, I was not able to transfer my own experiences to other situations. That did not happen until after I began teaching.

In the fall of 2000, I began teaching at a traditional middle school in North Carolina. Here, I was an eighth grade science teacher and an advisor to twenty students. I was ready to be a teacher, but had no understanding of what it meant to be an advisor. There was no instruction booklet on ways to be both a teacher and an advisor. I had to negotiate my own understandings of what to do my first year of teaching and I readily admit, it was not grounded in best practices. In all actuality, my advisory was more like a traditional home room where students filtered to at the

beginning of the day to take attendance, pick their lunch choices, and do some quiet reading. There was no actual community building.

During my second year of teaching, I relocated back to the northeast. I discovered a unique school that I wanted to be a part of, PAC. Fortunately, I was hired. PAC is a small independent public school that serves “at-risk” students from a mid-sized capital city in the northeast and surrounding urban-ring communities. At the time of this study, there were 142 students who attended PAC, the majority being from the capital of the state. Demographically during the 2010-2011 school year, PAC was sixty-four percent Latino/a, twenty-one percent African American, thirteen percent White, and two percent Native American. The Latino/a and White population at PAC had increased tremendously over the previous five years. During the study period, eighty percent of all students at PAC were bilingual. Along with this, thirty-five percent of the students’ families spoke a language other than English at home. Over ninety-three percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced fee lunch. Of the 142 students, fifty-five percent were male while forty-five percent were female.

Again, I was teaching science but did not have an advisory at first. This changed over my second and third year as PAC implemented an advisory program. All students at PAC were assigned to an advisor. At PAC, there were thirteen advisories; eight led by teachers, two by guidance counselors, one by the librarian, one by the special education teacher, and one by the director of the school. In general, there were ten to eleven students per advisory. During the student’s two years at PAC, they have the same advisor. This small, intimate setting allowed both teacher and student to know each other well. I found myself struggling with what it meant to be

an effective advisor. What was the role of the advisor and how was I to do this the best way possible?

My advisory group included ten girls who were also in my science class. These students were all part of a small, familiar, and less formal group, advisory, that does not contain a lot of social distance and includes solidarity (Fairclough, 2006). Social distance is the distance between different societal groups including social class, ethnicity, and gender.

During my formative years as an educator, I began to also make connections between my past experiences and the experiences my students were having on a daily basis. I wondered if any of the students needed more than they were getting from their schooling. I began to ask questions about how I could positively impact their lives in the science classroom and beyond. I also began to think about myself as an educator and a learner. I realized I had a lot of unanswered questions about education, and so I enrolled in the Doctoral Program.

As a first year Doctoral student, I was able to name problems in the education system but was not equipped to explore the impact of these problems on the students. One of the main problems I saw as a young educator was the lack of community within the school setting. The education system within the United States has not been set up to foster the socialization of citizens for the future. Among the numerous reasons, there is a distinct lack of community among teachers, students and all support staff. This lack of community can be directly connected to the absence of communication, even within small schools like the PAC. Many teachers feel isolated

from other staff and the community due to professional and personal segregation which is both self-imposed and created by the administration.

Early on I noticed how the symbolic act of a teacher shutting the door of the classroom can represent the teacher's inner-most struggles with education today. Many teachers feel isolated by the educational system, both professionally and personally. Isolation is not limited to only larger schools; this is also occurring in the smaller schools around the nation.

This segregation directly impacts the students' learning. I felt the lack of community directly impact the students as well as the staff.

Professional segregation can be traced back to the national feeling about teachers. Most of society views teaching as a job rather than a profession. Teachers are not given proper respect within our society and are not viewed as an educated group. It is not uncommon to hear people comment on teachers being the lower performing individuals throughout high school and college. This point of view is out dated and incorrect.

Professional segregation leads to the personal segregation that many teachers feel. However, teaching should be a social affair that enables improvement within a community (Dewey 1966). Teachers in the same schools, on the same academic team, are not given the proper time within the school's day to allow professional conversations to occur. "Planning time" among academic teams is usually filled with minor administrative details rather than productive professional conversations. Teachers not communicating with each other create a communication barrier with the

students. This lack of community transfers to the students and in turn lessens their academic experience.

Thinking of a school as a community, not just a place of business, allowed me to begin to address some of my larger questions.

While reading Rist (1970) and Anyon (1980) in my doctoral program, I began to make connections from my past experiences as a student to my current experience as an educator. I was able to negotiate what I saw and name the injustices that existed within the educational system. Rist (1970) and Anyon (1980) analyzed how social class determines educational experience. The problem exists in the differentiated education that students in poverty receive when compared to students of a higher social class. There are “different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes” (Anyon 1980, p. 67). Anyon showed that as social class increased among students, the teacher’s perception of the student’s behavior was richer and more developed.

Students from different social class backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits from different occupational strata- the working class for docility and obedience, the managerial class for initiative and personal assertiveness. (Anyon, 1980, p. 67)

Government funding, teaching materials, teacher preparation time, teacher education, and teacher support all increased when the social class of students increased which in turn can influence the curriculum (Anyon, 1980). In Rist’s study of a kindergarten classroom, social class and teacher expectations are shown to directly correlate to each other. Before the end of the second week of school, the teacher had already set up

class norms, seating arrangements and ability groups (unknowingly) based on social class (Rist, 1970).

These classic studies, and the contemporary works of Fine (2005), Weis (2000), Therstrom and Therstrom (2003), Oakes (1992), and Kadi (1992) strengthened the claim that social class determines the educational experience. Based on these readings, it became apparent to me that the educational experience of children across the United States varies depending upon social class, race, and region. This uneven educational experience could cause students within neighboring towns to receive a completely different education while still being held to similar state mandated academic standards.

What these studies did not explicitly state was that students are inadvertently judged on their geographic schooling and not the knowledge they possess. In other words, students who were educated in an urban school were already labeled underperforming even if they themselves were not underperforming.

This left me with the realization that urban schools need to be strengthened rather than sanctioned. Strengthening the urban schools would have a greater impact on all students and could in turn increase academic performance. The strengthening of urban schools could work to adjust for the hidden curriculum and could have a positive impact on the students, school and overall environment. It was and still is my belief that urban school teachers, students and staff should all be made aware of the underlying bias within the American educational system. In school, especially urban schools, it is essential to educate the whole student, to give them the knowledge to transcend their social class.



As I read Althusser (1971), Ellsworth (1989), McIntosh (1997), Foucault (1972), Giroux (1989), Freire (2000), and Gilligan (1993) I expanded my vocabulary and my thinking about education. It made me understand that the way to change the educational outcome of students was to change the students' perception of education.

### **For the Girls**

Over several years at PAC, I observed an increasing need for a safe place in my school for girls to discuss, analyze, and understand many of the struggles that they face on a daily basis. Girls in my school would stop between classes, after school, and in the hallways seeking connections with me and other female students. In response to their need, I created an open "girl talk" group at our school. In the beginning, three girls came to me before lunch asking if they could eat with me in my classroom. The talks were very casual, taking place only when requested by the girls themselves. As time progressed, the girls began to request the talk sessions more frequently, until they became a normal part of our Friday lunch. The format changed over the years, from extremely informal and less frequent, to more organized and frequent. In the beginning, the talks were not focused on one particular issue, allowing the girls to direct the conversations themselves. After a while, I found myself approaching other girls who seemed to need an outlet and inviting them to join the group. During this time, the group was completely voluntary, a place where the girls had a voice, a support group, and options.

While talking with these girls in this informal setting, it became clear to me that I needed this group just as much as they did. The open "girl talks" allowed me into the

students' relatively private lives, into their thoughts, fears, and aspirations. The talks enabled me to understand the girls in a different light, in turn creating a deeper, more fulfilling relationship between teacher and student. During this time I began to wonder, however, what was the true purpose of these talks? What impact did the "girl talks" have on the participants? Were the girls viewing these talks as important as I was? Was I really making a difference in their lives, academically and socially? And most importantly, were the girls changing their behaviors and self-concept based on the discussion we, as a group, engaged in? In light of these questions, this dissertation explores the impact of an all-girls advisory program on the lives of young women living at or below poverty.

In 2007, I approached the director of PAC and asked permission to have an all-girls advisory group. Traditionally, the advisory groups were co-educational and consisted of students who were both in my science class and ones who were not. I requested that all of my advisees be students that I taught in order to better understand them both academically and socially. The director granted my request, and in 2007 our all-girls advisory was born.

During year one with an all-girls advisory program, I received a lot of questions from the staff and students alike. Many of the members of the larger community wanted to understand why I was "excluding" the boys from my group. At this time I was ready to establish the group norms and dynamics but was not ready to justify the why to my colleagues.

At first this caused some concerns for some of the teachers within my community, mainly because I was not sure what would happen as a result of the all-

girls advisory, I only had my hypotheses but no really strong data for the group. Over time, this all-girls advisory became acceptable as a key space for girls in our school.

### **Research Question**

Again, In September 2007, I began working with an all-girls advisory group, further formalizing the open “girl talks.” Based on the success and popularity of the open “girl talks”, I became interested in exploring what effect these sessions might have on the girls when they are in the co-educational academic setting. In this dissertation, I will take up these questions. What impact does participation in an all-girls’ advisory program for young women living at or below the poverty line have on their academic and social success? What type of advisory environment makes these urban girls comfortable and allows them to be “themselves” within the co-educational setting?

In the first year of an all-girls advisory, I was able to understand and identify the specific needs in the group as well as fine tune my teaching to positively impact the group of girls in the group. There were some successes but also some failures.

During year two of my all-girls advisory I had a student who was not able to understand and negotiate the advisory-teacher relationship. This student came from a family that did not show their emotions or feelings often. She had mistaken my care for more than it was. She began walking by my house at night, calling my home, and leaving inappropriate messages on my answering machine. At that point, I began to think about what I did to enable this to happen. Why were my intentions so completely misinterpreted? After several conversations and many parent talks, it

became apparent that that one student was looking more for a motherly figure than a teacher-student, advisor-advisee relationship. This made me realize that I needed to adjust my approach to the group and take a step back and increase my knowledge of what an effective advisory would look like and feel like for these urban girls..

### **The Need for Understanding**

From 2008 to 2009, I conducted a data gathering focus group to understand what the girls needed in an all-girls advisory. First I focused on the school environment and then I turned to outside of school. I decided to incorporate media literacy components to enhance the conversation and enable the girls to talk about topics using the lens of another. By this I mean, they were able to disconnect themselves from the concepts long enough to look at the situations in a different way.

For the first focus group, I chose to show the movie *Mean Girls* (2004) to thirty five urban middle school girls during a two and a half hour block. The movie *Mean Girls* focuses on a student who moves during high school into a “traditional” school in anywhere America. During her transition, she is confronted with cliques and stereotypes. She is accepted by the “cool” group but just as quickly rejected. The film deals with common social situations in a very Hollywood like way.

Until this group was conducted and analyzed, it was not clear to me that the girls felt much more negative about their experiences at PAC than I first suspected. Looking at the data, the negative words seem to be much stronger than some of the positive words. For example, when describing their school experiences students used

the word “horrible” which leaves a lot of questions for me as the investigator. This word carries strong connotations and holds a lot of feeling.

When asked the question, what is it like to be a girl at PAC? Thirty six of the responses were negative while eighteen were either positive or neutral. Some of the negative responses ranged from sad and depressing to scary and mean. These words alone made me wonder what the girls needed from their school environment that they were not getting.

Next, we investigated how the social situations in the movie compared to the ones that they face daily at PAC. Interestingly, the girls were able to pick out the negative social situations and relate to them while none of the girls focused on the positive social situations in the movie. Some of the negative concepts the girls focused on were, people being fake, peer pressure, bullies, gossip and rumors. All of these answers spoke to a negative school culture that was not meeting the needs of the students it was supposed to help. In response to this question, forty six responses were negative while none was either neutral or positive.

While the movie takes place in an upper middle class predominately white school, the students at PAC had a distinct setting difference. When asked the question describe how it would be different if it took place in an urban school the students unanimously responded that an urban school would have been “harder” with more “physical” consequences. In other words, there is more violence in an urban setting than in the movie *Mean Girls*, yet the girls face the same social situation.

Furthermore, the girls discussed specific situations at PAC that caused them social pressure and anxiety. This part of the investigations provided me with an understanding of what the students went through on a daily basis and how to work against the dominant culture within the school to make positive changes in their lives.

This data opened my eyes to what was happening to our young girls at PAC. It enabled me to understand the girls on a different level and to relate to them in a more humanistic way. The girls who participated in the pilot study enjoyed their time together and asked if it was possible to do it again. Unfortunately, it was not possible. Fortunately, the girls in the pilot study recognized that they needed to give others a chance and talk to them. It was also apparent that they realized they needed to stop talking about others. I wonder what type of support the girls needed to help them be “nice” to others. This made me begin to envision what our advisory group could be.

The second focus group was created to understand the pressures outside of school that the girls face on a daily basis. Again, I went to the media and found a movie that focused on what it means to be a Mexican American teenager in the United States. It was important for me to find a movie that was centered on young Latinas so that the social distance among the members of the pilot study and the actors was limited.

The students in the focus group worked together to name and understand the social pressures they faced on a daily basis. The conversation focused around engaging students in conversation about self-esteem and expression. We centered the conversation around the movie *Real Women Have Curves* which is the story of an

eighteen year old Mexican American girl's experience in America with a mother who has traditional old world values. The film centered on the themes of self-esteem, gender roles, body image, school comfort, and stereotypes.

Many of the girls identified relationships with brothers and sisters as a major challenge they face at home as well as yelling and arguing at home and chores. I am not sure that any of these are uncommon among any teenagers, urban or suburban. Although, based on the literature, it is not uncommon that Latinas are held to more household chores than their brothers. This is rooted in gender norms within the culture.

Secondly, the girls were asked what types of pressure they face at school. Again many of the girls named the same types of challenges. On top of the list were girls and fake girls. The girls identified the challenge they face negotiating relationships among students of their own sex. They talked of girls trying to be something they are not, talking behind others back, and disrespecting each other in public. This strengthened my understanding of what the girls needed in an all-girls advisory. We needed to focus on community and relationship building. Along with relationships, several girls named keeping good grades and school work as a challenge they face on a daily basis.

After the second focus group, it was clear to me that I needed to focus on the whole child in order to create an effective advisory. By strengthening the girls' sense of self, I was also empowering the girls academically and socially. I now understood that this self-awareness and understanding of self-needed to be an essential component to our all-girls advisory.

### **Ready, set, go...**

As previously stated, I found that it was important for me to focus on the whole child in order for my all-girls advisory to be effective. Many of our students at PAC come ill equipped with both academic and social skills. It was my job through interactions with my students to encourage positive relationships among the students and their peers. I needed to work to engage all students in a well-rounded curriculum that is standards based, equitable, and empowering for all. In order to succeed at this, it was essential for me to ask the students what they need, incorporate their funds of knowledge, and create a relevant multicultural advisory curriculum. Teachers, in general, need to be culturally aware of the population they teach. By not knowing their students, they are doing a disservice to the students and themselves.

The two different yet related focus groups gave me the tools and data to understand the needs of the students and possible ways to engage the students in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

The students in my advisory during the 2010-2011 academic school year were exposed to a new type of advisory that I created based on the research I had done over time. It was during this time that I collected data and asked the questions that framed this study.

This dissertation is a qualitative study of an all-girls' advisory in a co-educational, urban middle school located in a mid-sized city in the northeast. The advisory group met daily over the course of the 2010-2011 academic year. Drawing from data collected over one year of fieldwork--including participant observation, constructive



discourse, dynamic interviews, and the analysis of social constructs using a cultural studies perspective--this study explores how a group of mostly African American and Latina students created a caring community in order to increase their academic and social success.

Each chapter of the dissertation examines the challenges and obstacles the girls in the advisory group faced in their daily lives, and their work together to overcome them. I begin by exploring the social constructs of gender, race, and class of the girls within the advisory group. I then explore the importance of building an effective and authentic advisory program to create a community grounded in care as well as my role as the advisor of this community. Here, I also explore how the girls in the advisory group began to negotiate their understanding of academic "success", namely how the girls grew to use their voices and advocate for themselves and others in order to achieve greater academic success. Furthermore, I discuss why accountability to the teacher and the group led to academic and social growth for the girls in the advisory.

I argue throughout the dissertation that an all-girls advisory provides the caring environment that enabled the girls to experience greater academic success. This study offers a perspective on how an all-girls advisory group empowers the girls within the group while providing them with the tools necessary to negotiate their daily lives. I also argue that the teacher student relationship is essential to the success of the advisory group and directly linked to the girls' academic and social growth.

In chapter two, the literature review, I explore the social constructs created by our urban educational culture. I argue that gender, race, and socio-economic status impact the student's daily academic lives. I trace cultural studies research as a way to

investigate and introduce empowerment. In this chapter, I also identify common obstacles in urban schools generally, and in middle schools more specifically.

In chapter three, methodology, I identify how I conducted the study and justify why I chose to use a qualitative approach to answer my research question. Here I discuss the complex role of teacher researcher and explore how it influenced my study.

In the findings chapter, chapter four, I explore major trends that developed over time from the data collected. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the all-girls advisory led to specific outcomes that benefited the girls in the study. I broke this chapter into two sections; community and success.

Part one of chapter four discusses the importance of single-sex grouping and provides justification for an all-girls advisory group. In this chapter, I claim that an authentic advisory curriculum grounded in community building creates a caring community. This study showed, that if the students feel connected to the advisory community they experienced greater academic success. Furthermore, I also claim that this study shows that if the girls feel connected to the advisor and are a part of an adult- led caring advisory, they also experience greater academic and social success.

Part two of chapter four focuses on understanding what it means to be successful in a traditional academic setting when compared to PAC. I claim that when the students in the advisory group began to use their voices they became empowered to advocate for themselves and others in the academic setting. By using their voices, they experienced greater academic success. I also claim that as the group became more accountable to each other, they were more successful academically at PAC. The

academic success they experienced at PAC enabled them to transfer their understanding of success and negotiate the more traditional view of academic success. Over time, as the group became empowered and accountable, I claim they also grew academically and socially.

In the conclusion, chapter five, I present three main findings from this dissertation study. From my data, I conclude that by focusing on social growth in advisory students will experience greater academic success. Through this experience, I changed as an educator after our all-girls advisory group. Secondly this study proves that an effective advisory needs to grow organically and be authentic to the individuals within the group yet grounded in strong routines and structure with a relevant curriculum. Lastly, I argue that the findings from this study can be generalizable to other advisory groups. If an advisory group is grounded in creating a strong community, care, accountability, and a common goal then the students within the advisory group will experience greater academic success.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to study urban girls and learning, I begin with the assumption that gender, race, and class have a significant impact on students' educational lives (Berliner and Calfee 1996; Fine and Weis 2005; Ward 2005; Deak 1998; Kutz 1997; Anyon 1980; Althuseer 1971; Delpit 1995; Freire 2000; Gee 1999; Kadi 1996, McIntosh 1988; Orenstein 1994). It is essential to understand the intersections that exist between the social constructs of gender, race, and class in order to investigate the girls' experience within the school setting. A social construct is any institutionalized entity in a social system "invented" or "constructed" by the participants in a particular culture that exists because people agree to behave as if it exists. The social constructs created by our urban school culture likely determine how the girls within my advisory group respond to everyday situations within the school. Let us take each of these constructs in turn.

#### **Overview of Gender and Schooling**

When observing schools, it is evident that girls and boys, even within the same classroom, have different experiences. This has led to the investigation into gender differences and schooling. It is important to note that gender roles are placed upon girls and boys long before they enter schooling. They are attached from the beginning, "from pink and blue tags in the hospital nurseries" (AAUW, 1992 p.10).

According to Grusky and Szelenyi (2007), “gender construction starts with the assignment to a sex category” (p. 277). By age seven, if not earlier, “children have clear ideas about gender, based on what they see in the world around them” (AAUW, 1992, p. 10). Over time, the children, living with gender based stereotypes, gravitate towards conformity. Throughout elementary school, girls and boys are equally likely to report “feelings of sadness, self-derogation, and physical complaints” (AAUW, 1992, p. 10). These similarities between the genders lessen during early adolescence. During early adolescence, “independent and reciprocal influences between both processes [biological and social] result in gender intensification, including a greater need for peer acceptance among girls” (Brutsaert and Van Houtte, 2004, p. 59). This can cause the girls to experience different anxieties and societal pressures from the boys.

There are at least three main disciplines that are concerned with gender, psychology, biological, and sociology. In educational psychology, “sex” is used to refer to biological based characteristics while “gender” is used to refer to socially based characteristics.

According to Berliner and Calfee (1996):

One large set of issues concerns the origins and development of children’s gender identity, gender stereotypes, and gender related behaviors and personality characteristics. Another, larger body of research pertains to issues regarding differences between males and females in behaviors, characteristics, and psychological processes. A third set of issues and concerns the constructs

of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny and their relation to behavior and mental health. (p. 358)

It is often believed that many gender differences are constructed through society and in turn influence gender development. Within the field of psychology, the three major approaches to studying gender are learning-based, cognitive, and biological. Learning-based approaches emphasize the role of environment on gender development. Social learning theory and cognitive social learning theory are included within this area. Both theories are based on the assumption that, as the environment changes, the individual changes to adapt to the new environment.

The cognitive approach is based on the assumption that individuals take an active role in perceiving and interpreting information from their environment (Berliner and Calfee, 1996). Cognitive-development theory and gender schema theories are both included within the cognitive approach.

The research within this area suggests:

Once children acquire an understanding of gender, they have a basis for organizing and regulating their social functioning.... Gender understanding-recognizing that males and females differ from one another is believed to occur gradually between 2 and 7 years of age and become irreversible during the concrete operational period. (Berliner and Calfee, 1996, p. 361)

With this knowledge, it is essential that gender socialization be taken into consideration when studying girls and schooling.

Lastly, the biological approach examines the influence of chromosomes and hormones on gender development. This approach is not essential to our discussion

because it is assumption that gender is a social construct which is influenced by the environment and not just by our biology.

Within the field of sociology and gender studies, the term "gender" is used to refer to the social constructions of masculinity and femininity. It does not however refer to biological differences, but rather “the different expectations and limitations imposed by society on girls and boys simply because they are female and male” (AAUW, 1992, p. 3). According to social learning theory, many gender differences are constructed through society and in turn influence gender development. Again, a social construct is any institutionalized entity in a social system "invented" or "constructed" by participants in a particular culture that exists because people agree to behave as if it exists. Girls in a coeducational school consistently experience gender as a social construct throughout their schooling experience.

School is a social setting which influences how people behave. It is important to highlight the social anthropology of school before entering the discussion of the specific impact of schools on gender. Social anthropology studies how people behave in specific social situations. Social anthropology indicates “what people do must be taken as the index to what they think and feel” (Firth, 1967, p. 3). Thus, the behaviors that girls express can be an indicator to how they feel within the social setting of school. According to Grusky and Szelenyi (2007), “gender is constantly created and recreated out of human interaction, out of social life” (p. 276). The social interactions and “social life” referred to are school. Even though girls have, and tend to gravitate towards stronger emotional and more supportive friendships, these relationships “have not been shown to protect against environmental stressors and provide stress relief”

(Brutseart and Van Houtte, 2004, p. 60). Therefore, girls need to be equipped with the skills necessary to engage in healthy interactions within the classroom and through all other social situations.

Furthermore, within these social situations, according to Lepper, Henderlong Corpus, and Iyengar. (2005,) “boys are more likely than girls to use communication strategies emphasizing dominance-that is, unmitigated emphasis on self-assertion” (p. 1489). These early social interactions that take place during young and mid adolescence may strengthen the gender inequalities seen in adulthood. In general, boys tend to put more emphasis on competition, dominance, status and power whereas girls are more concerned with social sensitivity and interpersonal harmony (Lepper et al, 2005). Taking this into consideration, it is essential to understand how these different approaches to communication impact the girls.

Research has shown that, within the classroom, boys and girls participate differently (Kutz, 1997). It is essential to note that “how teachers and students communicate with one another is a fundamental component through which a classroom environment is created and sustained” (Jones and Dindia, 2004, p. 443). According the Jones and Dindia (2004), “numerous studies have suggested that male students tend to have more interactions of all kinds with their teachers than do female” students (p. 444). Boys tend to be more vocal and active, while girls tend to listen, observe, and think. The style of pedagogy used by the teacher can disable girls from learning as much as boys in the same classroom. Kutz (1997) has shown that boys tend to dominate the classroom, which can lead to what appears to an educational experience that favors and privileges boys. “Beaker (1981), for instance, found that



boys received 63% of contact from teachers in secondary classrooms” (Jones and Dindia, 2004, p. 445). If the boys in the class are more eager to answer questions, even if their answers are incorrect, the boys are more engaged, have gained the teacher’s attention, and are more involved in the educational experience. This creates radically different experiences for boys and girls in K-12 schooling.

Much of the research on academic ability and competence suggests that expected success is based on stereotypical domains of achievement which are portrayed through the social construct of gender (Kutz, 1997). Because of this, girls tend to participate differently than boys within the coeducational classroom. For example, girls perceive they will not do “as well” in Mathematics and science although they tend to do just as well as boys on many standardized tests (AAUW, 1992).

Along with perceived academic ability, there are also key differences in self-concept among girls and boys. Girls experience a drop in self-esteem and self-concept. This drop in self-esteem and self-concept may be directly correlated to the negative messages that the girls receive via the curriculum (Gilligan, 1993). For instance, boys tend to believe they can do better in school and attribute their success to their knowledge and skills, while girls tend to attribute success to outside factors such as luck (Kutz, 1997; AAUW, 1992). These attributes could affect their classroom performance and disable the girls from gaining recognition for their achievement (Kutz, 1997). As young children, girls do not begin with lower self-esteem than boys of the same age. According to Ward (2005), research (primarily done with White girls) shows that before early adolescence, girls have a “confidence and a clear sense

of their own identity that declines as they reach the brink of adolescence,” which corresponds to the onset of middle school (p. 52). According to AAUW (1992), “the patterns of declining self-esteem, negative body image, and depression that begin at early adolescence do not disappear as the girls mature” (p. 13). Most scholars attribute the decline to the powerful messages girls receive from adults and popular culture that further constrain the girls’ sense of place within society, and in turn, for all intents and purposes force them into traditional female gender roles (Ward, 2005).

Gender and gender stereotypes need to be highlighted and in the forefront in the minds of educators. “There is clear evidence that the educational system is not meeting the girls’ needs” (AAUW, 1992, p. 2). We cannot ignore the link between gender and schooling, we need to explore the connection and understand the impact in order make the educational experience for girls equal to that of boys throughout their entire schooling process.

It is important to note that many of the girls within my school are members of a minority group within the United States, not within the school. All of the girls in our advisory group are either Latina or African American. Therefore it is difficult to have the discussion on gender without including race and ethnicity. Four of the girls in my advisory group are African American while the other six are Latina. It is important for me to be cognizant of the fact that all of my girls will have different cultural experiences that have worked to shape their subconscious views on gender.

Again, there is a great deal of overlap that exists between gender and race that cannot be separated in this discussion. Unlike White girls, African American girls have not demonstrated an inverse relationship with self-esteem as age increases

(Ward, 2005). Ward (2005) believes that African American girls are able to retain higher levels of self-esteem through adolescence when White and Latina girls are not. “A sense of individual and personal self-worth was important in the structure of self-esteem for Black girls” (p.53). This is mainly accomplished through closeness of family and reinforcement from the girls’ communities (Ward, 2005). However, the greater sense of self-esteem is not necessarily true in the area of academic ability. With this said, it is essential to understand how this dichotomy influences my small advisory. This difference in self-esteem results in specific and targeted tensions between the Latina and African American girls.

Additionally, research shows that African American girls are traditionally raised “in a way that would facilitate their girls’ ability to assume partial, if not full, responsibility for the financial survival of their family upon becoming woman” (O’Conner, 2002, p.166). This difference in surroundings contributes to the higher sense of self-esteem that the African American girl maintains through adolescence when compared to her White or Latina counterparts. However, this high self-esteem is not always regarded as positive. According to O’Conner (2002):

The same voice and power that are said to protect women against the loss of self-esteem and the loss of culturally specific gendered self are also said to place them in academic risk when they produce psychological isolation and are realized in conflict with school officials (p.167).

Many African American girls are labeled as “loud black girls” primarily because they do not conform to White middle class gender-specific norms (Fordham, 1993). As a result, African American girls are often negatively sanctioned, ironically

because of their stronger sense of self. For example, Ashee, an African American eighth grader within my advisory is perceived as “stuck up and into herself” by the other girls within the group. This is mainly because she holds an air of confidence that the other girls are currently lacking. By understanding the racial and cultural differences between the girls it is possible to educate the girls to accept all types of behaviors and attitudes, and to embrace the positive self-esteem that some girls portray as opposed to “hate on it” and feel threatened.

On the other hand, Latinas experience different struggles within the classroom. According to Delpit (1986), “Latino girls find it difficult to speak out or exhibit academic prowess in a gender mixed setting” (p. 170). Latina girls will often defer to the boys within the class to answer questions and participate (Delpit, 1986). By creating mixed gender classes, many educators are “depressing the exhibition of ability by the Latino girls in the class” (Delpit, 1986, p. 170). The prevailing stereotype of Latina girls is quite pessimistic, centered-around teenage pregnancy and school dropout (Denner and Guzman, 2006). For example, in a study I conducted in 2007 for EDP 662, there was a distinct difference between how girls, specifically Latina, communicated in and out of the classroom. Mary, in particular, chose to direct her conversation and questions to me rather than the other boys and girls within her small group. Looking back now, I feel that this difference between the girl’s participation within the formal setting could have been directly related to both gender as well as ethnicity and culture.

The information presented on race and gender is equally important as the information on gender alone. Since the girls at PAC have been educated in traditional

schools from kindergarten to seventh or eighth grade, they could be conditioned to this traditional type of learning environment.

My study is based upon my observations of these social situations that I have encountered at PAC. Exploring these questions of dominant culture that exist within our school with the girls will enable the girls to understand American culture and society through a different lens thus allowing them to gain multiple perspectives on important social constructs, including gender.

Providing girls with a place to listen and respond to others allows them to broaden their understanding of the world and also realize that they are not alone in their everyday experiences in and out of school. According to Weis and Carbonella-Mendina (2003):

Speaking out and hearing from others also readies young women to continue to do so in the future. If they speak out once, they will be able to speak out again. If they listen to others about sensitive subjects once, they will be able to do so in the future. They will be able to share and build women's communities, communities that support their right to live with respect, free from exploitation and abuse (p. 47)

It is my hope that the girls in my advisory group have gained life-long skills that can be used to advance them beyond their predetermined societal place. These skills will allow the girls to understand the importance of community and the need for a strong support group.

In this study, it was also essential that I was aware of how the girls participate differently in groups where other girls or boys are present. "For many urban youth,

racial, sexuality, class, and cultural markers prevent them from experiencing affirmation or engaged recognition in any ‘public space’” (Fine & Weis, 2005). With these pressures comes a need to talk about and to dissect the situations pressed upon the girls. Part of my research intent was to study the girls’ discourse and determine which areas provide responses of comfort. As their teacher, understanding more of the urban girls’ culture and society yields better results in the classroom, academic performance and competence as well as self-esteem. For an urban girl, this is also true. If an urban girl is educated about these gender differences that exist within our society and school, I believe she could also obtain better results in the classroom by becoming aware of and understanding the societal ideologies that influence her learning.

In closing, it is essential for me to understand these gender differences that exist in our society in order to better educate the girls about the world around them. It is also important to be aware of these differences within the classroom to ensure that I do not aid in creating a further gap between the sexes.

### **Social Class and Schooling**

While race and gender are central to my understanding of what informs this dissertation, it is also crucial to investigate the impact of social class on urban girls and learning. My understanding of these girls is informed by neo-Marxist theories about how power reproduces itself in society. Critical theorist Louis Althusser identifies patterns of reproduction and production within the society. (Re)production, as defined by Althusser (1971), is the idea that “every social formation must reproduce

the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce” (p. 160). In other words, society replicates the social order time and time again through social institutions, including but not limited to schools. For instance within the school setting, students are subjected to tracking, honors programs, standardized testing, etc. (Anyon, 1980). There is a constant reproduction of social classes and power that in turn produces a younger group of people who experience the same repression as the preceding generation. Unfortunately most schools do not actively challenge this system of class reproduction.

With social class dynamics of power comes cultural capital. An individual's place within society dictates what they will be culturally exposed to. According to Bourdieu (1973), cultural capital is the non-financial assets such as education, knowledge, and skills which determine their societal status. Based on this idea, it is essential to provide educational opportunities to enable social change.

According to this framework, the United States educational apparatus impacts every child in America, mainly because all children must legally attend school in this country. “It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’” (Althusser, 1971, p. 155). Urban girls experience this same reproduction, typically being born into low socioeconomic, working class families. Social class dictates the type of schooling and places students within their societal roles. This does not have to be the case.

Neo-Marxist frameworks offered by theorists such as Althusser (1971), Ray Rist (1970), and Jean Anyon (1980) identify how social class determines educational experience. The problem exists primarily in the differentiated education that students

in poverty receive compared to students of a higher social class. Schools offer “different types of educational experience and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes” (Anyon, 1980). In her oft-cited study, Anyon (1980) shows that as social class rose among students, the educational experience and the teacher’s perception of the student’s behavior was richer and more developed. Students from different social class backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits from different occupational strata--the working class for docility and obedience, then managerial class for initiative and personal assertiveness (Anyon, 1980).

There have been a lot of recent studies examining social class and schooling since the 1980’s. Reay (2010) found that current educational policies and initiatives have caused an increase in the social inequities. For instance, NCLB has increased tracking in schools across the United States (Reay, 2010). Reay also noted that working class schools are currently falling further behind their middle and upper class counterparts (2010). This inequity comes across in the curriculum taught, materials available, and the culture of the school. More working class schools tend to change their curricula eliminating the arts and physical education programs while restructuring mathematics and English to teach to the tests. Gamoran (2007) found that “differences in school performance are rooted in inequalities that lie outside the school and as long as wider social inequalities persist so will educational inequalities” (p. 222). Gamoran (2007) relates the problems within the educational system are directly related to larger social class issues that exist within our society. Without



addressing these issues within society they cannot and will not be addressed on the school level.

Similarly, Kelly (2008) found that classrooms that are tracked offer a different educational experience. After four decades of research, Kelly noted that “low track classrooms do not offer as rich an educational environment as high track classrooms” (2008, p. 190). Unfortunately, tracked classrooms benefit only the high track students while disadvantaging the low track students (Kelly, 2008). These findings directly relate to Anyon’s (1980) findings, different educational experiences impact the future career paths of students based on readiness and knowledge.

Furthermore, Lipman (2010) discusses how school choice has also disadvantaged the working class students more so than the middle or upper class students. There has been a ninety-five percent increase in many urban populations (Lipman, 2010). According to Lipman, “under the banner of school choice, there is a turn towards greater differentiation and stratification of educational experience and militarization of schools serving lower-income students of color” (2010, p.244). For instance, Chicago closed schools in low income African American and Latino communities and replaced these schools with selective public or charter schools that catered to the upper middle class (Lipman, 2010). In other words, choice schools become the good schools and are generally taken over by upper middle class families.

Education, by its nature, has the unfortunate ability to oppress the very people the system allegedly aspires to elevate. The historical nature of the American education system has led it to be perceived as a place where students learn from their

knowledgeable teachers. There are many problems with this assumption, one being that the teacher basically counts on the students' ignorance, and, in turn, that the students accept their ignorance. In this model of teaching, which Freire (1970) refers to as "banking education," students are asked to listen, memorize, deposit, and never question why. This teaching method, unfortunately, is still used by a vast number of educators today, especially within urban districts. It is necessary for me to understand the educational system my advisory girls have been exposed to for the last seven years of schooling in order to recognize how their experiences have shaped their learning. One of the major problems with banking education is that it does not employ the critical thinking skills that ultimately lead to true learning. Freire (1970) introduces a different approach to education that utilizes more of the students' skills, thus allowing for real learning to take place. Freire (1970) refers to this as "authentic thinking." "Authentic thinking (is) thinking that is concerned about reality." Authentic learning gives rise to "problem-posing" education. "Problem-posing" education is a cry for academic rigor for both the teacher and the student. "Problem-posing" education works towards demythologizing, to increase dialogue, create critical thinkers, empower creativity, and foster true reflection.

The education system within the United States has not been set up to foster the socialization of all citizens for future advancement nor allowed all schools to actively engage in "problem-posing" education in part because of the ratio of teacher to student. Since the 1980s, urban schools have begun to investigate the relationship between school size and student success. All of my advisory girls come from large, urban, middle schools that are too often over-crowded and understaffed.

It is vital for me to understand all of the societal pressures that these urban girls face in an effort to educate and provide them with the tools necessary to understand and possibly change their predisposed position within society. The girls spend a majority of their time in the school, which in turn influences them more than one might initially think. Their everyday experiences in school work towards shaping the girls as members of society. Not all of these experiences are positive. Most urban schools are not enabling all students to gain the skills they need to promote core changes within the individual.

Gender, race, and social class are key anchors in the theoretical underpinning of this project. My understandings of gender, race, and social class are central to understanding the girls' lives and work to inform how I see them and how they see themselves within the societal framework.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

In the context of my ongoing conversations about gender, race, social class, and the American educational system, this dissertation will explore the lives of girls in one urban school using a cultural studies approach. Cultural studies provides a lens to identify the types of social constructs imbedded within society that shape the identities, perceptions, and behaviors of urban girls at PAC. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that works to integrate the social sciences. It ties in the works of sociologists, educators, anthropologists, philosophers, and historians to create a clearer picture of our society. Cultural studies is politically positioned and concerned with questions of ideology and power. It is crucial to

understand how dominant ideology shapes our culture if we are to understand our culture and experience success. “By learning dominant culture, students are theoretically enabled in that they are given the wherewithal for particular manners of action and behavior within that culture” (Giroux, 1998). If the girls participating within this study understand the dominant culture, they may be more able to change (it).

I will also use theories of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy allows the student to “recognize and name injustice, empower students to act against their own and others’ oppressions, criticize and transform her or his understanding” (Ellsworth 1989, p.300). Through this educational approach students will construct an understanding of “freedom, justice, democracy, and universal values.” With this said, it is important for me to understand what this would look like in the classroom to be effective for me and the girls.

In the context of cultural studies and critical pedagogy, there are three major strategies I adopted from Ellsworth when creating my critical curriculum for advisory: empowerment, teacher as learner, and authoritarianism. Student empowerment involves “sharing, giving, or redistributing power to students” (Ellsworth 1989, 301). Ellsworth (1989) writes that the goal is “to give students the analytical skills they need to make them free, rational, and objective” (p. 301). Empowerment, in order to be effective, must include “human betterment.” Empowerment, to me, strengthens the need for Freire’s problem-posing education. Empowering the girls to guide their own learning will create more meaning and allow the girls to connect to their educational experience on a different level.

Along the same lines, I firmly believe in the teacher-as-learner concept that allows power barriers to be broken between teacher and students. A teacher should be a life-long learner. As a teacher grows and changes, so do her students. “The teacher selecting the objects of study knows them better than the students as the course begins, but the teacher re-learns the objects through studying them with their students” (Ellsworth 1989, p.300). This is the true meaning of teaching and learning and should not be limited to just the students. I looked forward to learning and relearning with the girls in my study and was confident all of us would gain from this study.

Lastly, Ellsworth calls for the acknowledgement of power the teacher has over the students she teaches and she warns of the dangers of authoritarianism. Ellsworth determines that some power is tolerable while too much becomes intolerable. If the teacher becomes a productive facilitator who enables all to feel comfortable and safe, this will allow for a more productive classroom. I have set a distinct tone since the very beginning of the advisory group which allowed for us to have productive meeting throughout the academic year that enabled all students to feel safe and comfortable within the group by providing them with a specific structure that reinforces cooperative group skills.

### **Overview of Issues within Middle School**

There has been a growing distinction between the students in elementary school and those in middle or high school. As a student begins to negotiate middle school, there are definite pressures that emerge for both boys and girls. According to AAUW (1992), “early adolescence is a significant transition period for both sexes” (p.

11). Midgley and Edelin (1998) discuss how positive interpersonal relationships and the emphasis on understanding, mastery, and challenge break down when students moved from elementary to middle levels school. Along with this, Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1998) note that one change that has a predictable timetable for the entire group: it is the educational move into middle school. This change brings with it increased academics and social challenges that leading to stress and adjustment problems for many adolescents.

Many students face challenges as they transition from elementary school to middle school; school size, teacher-student ratio, student involvement, and changes in society aid in this discomfort.

The size of the school and the teacher-student ratio are challenges the students face during this transitional time. Secondary teachers, middle and high school, face as many as one hundred and fifty students per day. Each day for fifty minutes, these students are counting on their teacher to provide them with the education they deserve, the feedback necessary for academic growth, and the individualized instruction to enable them to succeed. Because of this, many of our students are “short changed.” According to Vander Ark (2002) many seniors lack basic reading and mathematics skills. Nearly one in five cannot identify the main idea in what they read, and nearly two in five haven’t mastered the use and computation of fractions, percents, and averages (p.56).

On top of this, “the average black and Hispanic student at the end of high school has academic skills that are at about the eighth-grade level” (Thernstrom and

Thernstrom 2003, p. 22). Based on this, it is evident that many students need more attention than the typical public school teacher is able to give.

Levin (2002) states:

With more than 20 students during each class period, no teacher can provide much individual attention. Nor can they comment adequately on assignments, because spending even 10 minutes per student each week would require 20 hours of work after school. That's on top of lesson planning, lunch duty, study hall, office hours, staff meetings, and advising student activities (p. 14).

Clearly, students deserve more from their education.

It is essential to limit the number of students per teacher. Teachers, novice to experienced, are only able to know a "finite number of individual students" (Sizer 1997, p. 41). According to Levin (2002), Sizer while quoting a student, states "no one really knows what I learned last year or what exactly I still need to learn." (vii). School size and teacher-student ratio cause students to feel a disconnect to their schooling and school environment. It is evident students need to have a personal connection to their school and the teachers within the school.

Connected with school size and teacher-student ratio is the fact that, as students move into larger middle and high schools, their involvement within the school decreases.

Large urban schools have attendance problems with larger drop-out rates than small urban schools. "Studies show that small schools have higher attendance rates and lower drop-out rates, their students have higher grade point averages, and students and teachers report greater satisfaction with the school experience" (Vander Ark, 2002

p. 55). Going hand in hand with this, smaller schools have greater graduation rates (Levin, 2002). Many students in middle and high school do not have the opportunity to attend small(er) schools. This could be based on location, money, lack of parental involvement or education.

Students of large schools also tend to participate less and do not have a sense of belonging. More students at small schools participate in a wide range of school activities both during and after school when compared to large schools (Davis and Jackson, 2000). Along with this, research stretching back to 1964 has shown that students in small schools are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Vander Ark, 2002). Levin (2002) states, “Students in small schools also participate in a wide range of activities, take on more responsibility, and enjoy their participation more than students in large schools” (p. 15). Again, this is not the case for the majority of students attending middle and high school. Many attend schools that are large and overcrowded, where they just become a number or a face and are not really known by any of their teachers.

There are several other factors that have a serious impact on our middle school students. Changes within our society have forced middle school students to face pressures outside of the classroom that also impact their classroom experience and performance. For example, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of two or single parent working households (Johnston, 1994). Also, increasing numbers of families need to relocate mainly due to economic reasons (Johnston, 1994). Students, in many circumstances, are taught to be fearful of adults, which disables any productive relationship that could exist between teachers and students (Johnston,



1994). Lastly, Johnston (1994) points to the change of “purpose” for young adults. At one time, young adults used to be a source of income for the family whereas now they are often thought of as a liability (Johnston, 1994). All of these changes in society have further disconnected students from their schooling and their schooling environment.

### **School Reform and Middle School Advisory**

Over the years, to address the ever growing needs that middle school students adults face there have been various school reforms focused on changing the core of the school to enable greater student success both academically and socially. One of these reforms which concentrates on the student’s well-being is the implementation of Advisory within Middle Schools. According to Midgley and Edelin (1998), the best way to address the quality of relationships is developing an advisory program. Advisory enables students to have a relationship with at least one teacher within the school.

Advisory programs can be traced back to the 1880s (Myrick, Highland, and Highland, 1986). In 1889, a school principal implemented a curriculum that included both “vocational and moral guidance” (Wittmer, 1993). According to Galassi et al. (1998), by 1890, advisory began to become incorporated into junior high schools (p. 5). In 1920, “Briggs recommended that ‘in order that the individual pupil may not be neglected by several of his teachers, it has seemed not only wise, but actually imperative, that some adult be appointed as his advisor’” (Galassi et al., 1998, p. 6). Over time, schools began to move away from advisory and utilize more of a guidance

program and homeroom. Although, it was noted that the “administrative homeroom of the junior high did not provide sufficient guidance and that every teacher needed to be prepared to help students with personal problems and to coordinate the components of their educational programs” (Galassi et al., 1998). This highlighted the need to return to advisories within the middle school, as opposed to administrative homerooms.

Students need to feel connected to their schools. An advisory program is one approach that is able to accomplish this connection. According to Jackson and Davis (2002), “every student should be well known by at least one adult” (p. 142). It has been shown that when students make a connection with an adult within the school, there are measurable improvements academically and socially. According to Galassi et al, (1998) “the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is the single most important aspect of middle school education” (p. 7). In advisory group, teachers are able to provide support for their students on a different level, to enable more students to succeed in school. “Middle school advisory programs provide an opportunity for both advisors and advisees to belong to a ‘family,’ a chance to secure physical and emotional affiliation without sanctions of grades based on mastery of skills” (Galassi et al. 1998, p. 9). The closeness of the group and the security of the environment allow students to feel more comfortable discussing personal concerns and relevant social pressures (Galassi et al., 1998). A successful advisory, “provides a further opportunity for the personalized guidance and active mentoring young adolescents need” (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p. 143).

Advisory period allows the students and teacher to cover specific topics that they would not be able to cover in the traditional classroom. “The range of potential advisory topics is vast, from interpersonal issues to health-related questions or concerns about schoolwork” (Jackson and Davis, 2000, p.143). During this time, students are given a voice and are able to have input into the curriculum, the content of the discussions, and the activities covered. The advisory program works to target many of the societal pressures that these young adults face in order to empower them. According to Fenwick in Jackson and Davis (2000), strong advisory programs “help students gain emotional strength, self-knowledge, and social skills through peer interactions and the acceptance and personal affirmation of trusted adults (p. 144).

In general, the uniqueness of the advisory group allows students to work together by “brainstorming, solution webbing, decision trees, and cooperative group problem solving” to work through some of the social situations many students face (Galassi et al 1998). Within advisory, students work together to solve various academic and social problems. This setting allows students to learn with and from each other in a cooperative style, which fits clearly with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development theory, the “distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 19). Within this development zone, functions are not yet matured but are in the process of maturing. While the actual development level and tests determine the mental level of what a child already knows, the Zone of Proximal Development determines what a child will know in the near

future. In this model, the development process lags behind the learning process. The Zone of Proximal Development makes a clear case for cooperative learning within the classroom as well as grade level heterogeneity. Students can learn from other students and teachers especially within the realm of problem solving. Students who have lower, less developed skills benefit from this cooperative environment, as do the more advanced students. This grouping allows all students to learn with and from one another.

Advisory programs work to make the student a part of a smaller group. This group then enables to students to have a relationship with at least one adult within the school. These relationships are essential to the success of the students, both academically and socially.

### **Advisory and My Study**

During my time at PAC, I came to understand the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Over time, I began to realize that this relationship can be nurtured through the small group advisory. When I began at PAC, I started with a traditional coeducational advisor group. There were some dynamics within the group that caused me to question if a co-educational advisory can truly target all students' needs, especially teenage girls. It was possible that having the boys in the group inhibited the depth of conversations we had in the group.

Since the girls at PAC have been educated in traditional schools from kindergarten to seventh or eighth grade, they could be conditioned to this type of learning environment.

During a science class, I noticed an interesting trend. In a co-educational group the girls would direct their questions and comments to me rather than the group. It was disturbing to me that when the girls did talk during the group session, many addressed their comments and questions to me rather than the group. Kutz (1997) notes that even within the less formal classroom setting the teacher, unknowingly, focused more often on the boys thus inviting more participation (p. 197). Kutz also goes on to describe boys as more aggressive about volunteering answers and that they are called on more often (p. 197). This aggressive nature of the boys, even when unconscious, was impacting the group, especially the girls within the group. It also made me begin to question, why did the student feel a need to address me, was it gender identification, teacher-student relationship or something more? This caused me to question if a single sex advisory would be more beneficial to the girls in our school.

It was here that the idea of a single sex advisory became a center focus to my study. This study advanced the knowledge of urban girls and their educational lives. This study allowed me to explore how girls are impacted by the knowledge gained during a cultural studies-based advisory program. Exploring this topic allowed the girls to understand American culture and society through a different lens thus allowing them to gain multiple perspectives on important social constructs. Providing the girls with a place (i.e. advisory) to listen and respond to others allows them to broaden their understanding of the world and also realize that they are not alone in their everyday experiences in and out of school. Again, within the group, it was my hope that the

girls would gain life-long skills and that these skills would allow the girls to understand the importance of community and the need for a strong support group.

This study also allowed me to explore if the girls in the advisory program participate differently in groups when others are present. It has been proven that the more comfortable the girls are, the more they will participate. It has become clear that girls need a specific environmental setting to allow their comfort level to increase, and hope to identify this area within my research. “For many urban youth, racial, sexuality, class, and cultural markers prevent them from experiencing affirmation or engaged recognition in any ‘public space’” (Fine & Weis, 2005, p. 9). With these pressures comes a need to talk and to dissect the situations pressed upon the girls. Part of my research intent is to study the girls’ discourse and determine which areas provide responses of comfort. As their teacher, understanding more of the urban girls’ culture and society could yield better results in the classroom. For an urban girl, this is also true. If an urban girl is educated about society using the cultural studies approach I believe she could also obtain better results in the classroom by becoming aware and understanding societal ideologies that influence their learning. This understanding will also transfer to their social learning.

In closing, advisory works to address many of the social and academic pressures that students feel in a middle school setting. Many of these pressures appear during the transition from elementary school to high school. School size, teacher-student ratio, student involvement, and changes in society have impacted the students schooling experience. The issues these students face can be lessened through advisory. Since studies have shown that girls experience greater pressure than boys

during this transitional period, a single-sex advisory might aid the girls by creating a comfortable place for them to learn and grow.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Overview of Qualitative Research**

Educational research can be split into two main categories: quantitative and qualitative. For a long time, quantitative research was the only method that was accepted as meaningful mainly because the conclusions were based on mathematical analysis, usually statistical, as well as, concrete observations. Over time, qualitative research has become more and more acceptable. The history of qualitative research in education within the United States is derived from early American sociology as well as anthropology (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is defined as “an approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects’ point of view” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 274).

Most qualitative researchers tend to hold the postmodern holds that all claims to objectivity are doubtful mainly because everyone is influenced by the world around them either consciously or subconsciously. Postmodernism believes that all knowledge is constructed culturally and is committed to “deconstructing” the myths. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), there are five main qualities to qualitative research; naturalistic, descriptive data, concern with process, inductive, and meaning. Qualitative research is considered naturalistic because it has “the actual setting as the direct source of data” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 4). The data is collected and supplemented by being in a specific location that aids in the understanding that the



researcher gains. This is embedded in the belief that the context and setting of the study is important to understanding the actions of the participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

Qualitative research and data are descriptive. “The data collected takes the form of words or pictures rather than numbers (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 5). The data can include interviews, field notes, video and audio tapes, and other official records. Most qualitative research provides “quotations and try to describe a particular situation” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 5). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), “In collecting descriptive data, qualitative researchers approach the world in a nitpicking way” (p. 5). Nothing is taken for granted or trivial, everything is examined.

Qualitative research is concerned with the process not just the outcomes or products of the study (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Qualitative researchers are particularly concerned with a number of questions: “how do people negotiate meaning, how do certain terms and labels come to be applied, how do particular notions come to be taken and part of what we know as ‘common sense,’ what is the natural history of the activity or events under study” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 6). Data analysis in qualitative research tends to be inductive (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Researchers “do not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses they hold before entering the study; rather, the abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 6). Thus, the theories developed are considered “bottom up” and grounded in data. Qualitative

researchers are not putting together a puzzle but rather developing the theory based on the collected and examined data (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007).

“Meaning is the essential concern to the qualitative approach” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 7). Qualitative researchers are interested in “participant perspectives,” how different people understand and make sense of their lives (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Qualitative researchers are particularly concerned with making sure they capture the participant’s point of view correctly, this can be accomplished through member checking. Member checking includes bringing the findings back to the participant to ensure that what they were saying and the researcher’s interpretation are aligned.

Qualitative research can be further subdivided; action research is one of the many categories. Action research is a “deliberate, solution-orientated investigation” that is generally characterized by a problem identification, data collection, reflection, analysis, data driven action and problem redefinition (Johnson, 1993). Action research is interested in bringing about social change by understanding social injustice, and in turn “change existing practices of discrimination and environmental endangerment” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 239). Action research can also enable individuals to “understand themselves better; increase their awareness of problems, and raise commitment” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 240).

Within action research there is teacher research. “Teacher researcher has its roots in action research” (Johnson, 1993). According to Hubbard and Power (2003), “teacher researchers bring an important element that outside researchers lack- a sense of place” (p. iii). Similarly, Wong (1995) notes that “teaching cannot be understood

fully from the perspective of an outsider” (p. 25). Only by teaching and encountering the group on a daily basis can one determine what is needed for change to take place. According to Lawrence Stenhouse in Johnson (1993), it is the teacher who will change the world of the school by understanding it.

### **Qualitative Research and My Study**

Over time, I came to realize that the best way for me to understand and answer my research question, what impact does participation in an all girls’ advisory program for young women living at or below the poverty have on their academic and social success, was to employ qualitative research methodology. I highlighted my study in relation Bogdan and Biklen’s five qualities of qualitative research.

1. Naturalistic- the study takes place within our advisory in a specific location at a specific time each day
2. Descriptive Data- daily field notes, active interviews, focus group (advisory), transcription and modified translation
3. Concern with process- interested in understanding change over time, how students negotiate meaning, the students view point over time
4. Inductive- research question developed over time as a need for an all girls’ advisory emerged. Question continuously emerged based on the data collected and observations. My data shows that there is some generalization that can occur between my findings and other advisory groups in similar situations.

5. Meaning- interested in understanding how the participants (girls) in the study understand and interpret the world around them. Devout interest in understanding and staying true to the participants' perspective

The “girl talks” advisory focused on both classroom climate and group dynamics using the cultural studies approach previously identified. The discussions were the center of my data. Exploring what the girls said enables them to learn and allow them to be comfortable within the classroom. The second part of the study was individual active interviews with audio recording, transcription, and translation throughout the school year. This allowed me the opportunity to ask each girl a question directly related to their experience within the advisory group.

In order to answer the research question, I needed to give the students the voice. I chose to use adapt common practices from discourse analysis to understand the individual active interviews and focus group discussion (advisory). Traditional discourse analysis, as defined by Kutz, is the “study of language as it is used by speakers and writers in actual communicative context” (Kutz 1997, p. 301). Discourse analysis “is based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language” (Fairclough 2003, p. 2). . Ideally, “all that can be known is what people construct in their discourse; mental state, processes, attitudes, beliefs cannot be known” unless stated by the participant (Horton-Salway 2001, p. 148). I did not translate the interviews in terms of turns, lines, utterances and pauses. Instead, I chose to modify

both the discursive action model and the difference and dialogicality model from discourse analysis in order to analyze my discourse data more objectively.

The Discursive Action Model allows me to understand what the girls are saying based on their own words (Horton-Salway, 2001). This approach is concerned with “how events are described and explained, how factual reports are constructed, [and] how cognitive states are attributed” by the participant. In this discourse model, social constructs are treated as epistemic. Ideally, “all that can be known is what people construct in their discourse; mental state, processes, attitudes, beliefs cannot be known” unless stated by the participant (Horton-Salway 2001, p. 149). Fairclough (2006) states that the social world is created by social constructs. Because of the nature of social constructs, dominant ideology contributes to the student’s understanding of the social world and will surface during advisory discussions. In this dissertation, I will use these emergences to examine gender, race, social class, and the education system with the girls.

The Discursive Action Model does not allow me to examine anything that is not stated by the girls. As Billig states in Horton-Salway, “there is...nothing ‘inner’ about it, it is wholly on the outside, wholly brought out in exchanges” (2001, p. 148). This style of discourse analysis lends itself to a reflexive dilemma. It is difficult but necessary that I understand exactly what the participants are referring to thus leaving no interpretations to the girls’ cognitive state. As a researcher, it was difficult for me to transcend my own constructive practices. To account for this, I adopted Fairclough’s difference and dialogicality model to understand how students use discourse to construct understanding and meaning.

The difference and dialogicality model identifies “an openness to, acceptance of, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference,” “an attempt to resolve or overcome difference,” and “a focus on commonality [and] solidarity” (Fairclough, 2006). Through true dialogue, conversations, more than one point of view is brought into the group’s discussion which allowed the group the ability to construct their own meaning.

Similarly to Leaper et al. (1999), transcripts were created verbatim from recorded interviews and advisory conversations. Once recorded and transcribed, the data was coded looking for commonalities between responses. These commonalities as well as differences were logged for reference. To aid in reliability, data was checked with the participants of the study (member checking).

Using these adapted discourse analysis models enabled me to understand the students through the language they use as well as their written text. In order to measure the impact that participation in an all girls’ advisory has on the girls within the advisory, it was essential for me to listen to what the girls said during the active interviews and group discussions. Participating in the interviews and group discussions enabled me to ask appropriate follow up questions to ensure I understood what the girls said and not misinterpreting their intentions. Through this adapted discourse model, I was able to look for trends throughout the analysis.

The third part of the study, student written reflections and post-it note responses, were used to assess the students’ attitudes and behaviors during the study and occurred daily during the advisory year.

According to Kutz (1997), the linguist Wallace Chafe found that “writing allows ideas to be presented more densely and compactly because the writer has more time to place those ideas in precise relationships to one another, and the reader has time to process that integrated information” (p. 257-258). The written reflections within the “girl talks” advisory used more of a journal format, again with prompted and non-prompt topics while post-it note responses asked the students to answer specific question quickly. Both were used to assess girls’ perceptions in relation to classroom climate and comfort level. I looked for commonalities and differences between the girls’ entries. In turn, the responses were used to guide classroom pedagogy and lesson planning, as well as, our advisory curriculum development. The reflections also offered insight into what the girls’ believe they need in order to be successful. The journals were used to support the “girl talk” discussions and assess the advisory program. The journal entries were essential to this study. These entries gave the students another way to use their voice and be heard throughout the year. In the advisory group, some of the girls were more vocal than others. The journals enabled all the students to express themselves in a different format. Some of the girls in the study preferred the individual writing to group discussions. By providing both forms of communication, I was able to understand and know more about the girls in the advisory group.

The nature of this study also pointed to the impact of social dominant ideologies imposed on the participants. Social dominant ideologies have a direct effect on discourses and need to be considered in this study. “Ideologies are representations of aspect of the world which can be shown to contribute to

establishing, maintaining, and changing social relations of power, domination, and exploitation” (Fairclough, 2006). This directly connects to the postmodernism belief that knowledge is constructed culturally.

Qualitative research was the best fit for this study. It allowed me to answer the question using rich, descriptive data collected through conversations and writings which are not easily managed by mathematics or statistics. Data collection was accomplished “through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 2).

### **Data Sources**

Structured and unstructured discussions formed the content and curriculum for our “girl talks” advisory which met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings from 8:15-9am. I collected data over the academic school year during 2010-2011. Data was collected in five ways:

- Teacher journal
- Post it notes
- Active interviews
- Group discussions
- Student journals

Teacher journals occurred biweekly, Tuesday and Thursdays, over the course of the academic school year. During this time, I would write for at least fifteen minutes about events that have occurred, questions that I have for the students or myself, concerns about the students or the advisory time, and/or personal



challenges that arose. In total, I collected over eighty teacher journal entries that enabled me to put together the stories and journey of the girls and me as we navigated our time together.

The students and I used post it notes as a daily form of communication. Each morning of our advisory group, I would ask a question. The girls would answer these questions on post-it notes. Over the course of the school year, the girls and I completed three post-it notes a week or approximately one hundred and ten per participant. Not all post-it note responses were archived as data. Most of the post-it note responses were used to look for commonalities and differences among our group and strengthen our community. For instance, many of the post-it notes focused on the students' interest (i.e. music) or favorites (i.e. ice cream flavor).

Each advisory student participated in two individual active interviews with me during the academic school year. The first interview was conducted On October 15, 2010. Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes each. The first interview set a baseline for understanding the girls on an individual level. Each of the participants were given the time to introduce who they were as a learner and a person. The first interview was an opportunity for me to uncover some of the misconceptions and preconceptions the girls may have about advisory time and learn their attitudes and beliefs about school.

The second active interview occurred on April 12, 2011. The second interviews, similarly to the first, lasted approximately ten minutes. During the second interview, I was able to ask the girls similar questions to the first interview and look for changes in their responses. For instance, during both interviews the

girls were asked to describe the advisory group. The second interview answers yielded much more specific and developed responses, the girls were able to name and describe what they were a part of. The second interview was an opportunity for me to determine if some of the misconceptions and preconceptions the girls may have about advisory time had changed. It was also a time for me to explore if their attitudes and beliefs about school changed over time.

Both interviews together provided over three hours of audio data that enabled me to investigate what the girls said, the words they used, and the changes that took place over time as a result of our all girls' advisory group.

Advisory group met for approximately two hours per week over the academic school year, or thirty six weeks. During the academic year, as an advisory group, we met for about seventy two hours. Each advisory session was a time where the girls and I were able to have thoughtful conversations. In the beginning of the school year, these conversations were considered "low risk" topics to ensure the group was able to trust each other and create a sense of community. Once we have established a trusting environment the group discussions became richer and more personal. All group discussions were logged and categorized on a daily basis. Some of these advisory sessions were taped. In total, approximately four and half hours of advisory group discussion were used in this study.

Students in the advisory would also complete weekly journal entries. The journal entries occurred on Mondays in advisory group for ten minutes. Each student produced thirty one journal entries over the course of the academic school year. I read and responded to all journal entries on a weekly basis. The journal

entries were used to shape the group discussions and develop individual active interview questions.

### **Limitations of Qualitative Research in My Study**

The benefits of this study while apparent, also presented some limitations. Since this study is concentrated in one alternative middle school in a New England city, it will not be considered generalizable. Generalizability refers to “whether the findings of a particular study hold up beyond the specific research subjects and the setting involved” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 36). The study was designed to help a distinct group of students. The girls at this school displayed a unique situation, generally under representation in the classroom and labeled “at-risk” of not finishing school, and, therefore, may have benefited from this study.

As with all qualitative research, there is always the concern that the “researcher’s opinions, prejudices, and other bias will affect their data” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 37). This can be defined as subjectivity as opposed to objectivity. This is a concern because the researchers needs to process the data before recording the data, this raises the possibility that the research could record only what they want or what they “think” they see. In order to overcome this, the researchers must choose reliable methods to record and analyze their data.

Another foreseen limitation to the study is that I am the students’ teacher as well as the researcher. I cannot therefore separate the two roles. However, being both researcher and teacher allowed me insight into the students that was necessary to analyze the data appropriately. Since this study is strongly student centered, it was

important to understand the students in the study on a deeper level. Being the girls' teacher provided me the opportunity to understand the girls' needs as a learner as well as an individual. Along with this was the pure fact that by studying the girls may change their behaviors. "Researchers can never eliminate their own effects on subjects" but they can understand these effects and be honest about them (Bogdan and Biklen 2007, p. 39).

There are even further tensions that exist as one enters the teacher researcher role. Wong (1995) noted a "distinct tension between trying to be systematic and thorough and trying to be responsive and compassionate" (p. 25). There are times when trying to maintain a certain continuum of questioning and understand, the student could have felt singled out and misunderstood.

Wong (1995) provides an example from his own research:

To gain a rich understanding of an individual's knowledge typically requires a series of extended, probing questions. In the content of this classroom, however, my actions seemed unfair, inconsiderate, or irresponsible. My efforts to be thorough and systematic-to exercise 'control' in the research sense- in learning about [the student's] explanation simultaneously led to a loss of 'control' in the teaching sense (p. 26).

Basically, there is a fine line that a teacher researcher must always be aware of when approaching research in the classroom. The teacher part needs to still be compassionate and responsive while the researcher part needs to push to understand.

In general, according the Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research is considered very time consuming. All data is considered relevant and therefore data

reduction is difficult, if at all possible. Qualitative research procedures are not standardized and it is difficult to study large populations.

### **Other Possible Method(s)**

When designing this study, I found myself naturally drawn to qualitative research although often questioned if I should incorporate mixed methods. There are studies with both qualitative and quantitative components (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). By combining the methods, I could have added counts and measures to my discourse section of my data collection. I also would have been able to incorporate some statistical analysis to the study that might have been seen as more reliable or valid. I was concerned about this mainly because the question I am asking is grounded in social interactions and adding quantitative components could create a certain level of detachment and decided not to incorporate quantitative measures.

I could have chosen to do a case study of just one or two of my advisees. A case study is “a detailed examination of one setting, one single subject” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 59). This technique would have allowed me to go more in depth with just one or two students within my advisory but this method had the potential of not yielding reliable data. When studying one or two students, “the more likely you are to change their behaviors by your presence” (Bogdan and Biklen 2007, p. 62). On the other hand, case studies are considered “easier” for novice researchers. In a way, I conducted a case study of my advisor group, although the group is a somewhat large.

In closing, I would like to add that I am comfortable with the research methods chosen for this study. I feel qualitative research, more specifically action research,

enabled me to answer my research question and provide understanding which will enhance the schooling experience for the students in my advisory as well as the other students within the school. Action research provided me with the tools necessary to challenge and change the system.

Throughout this dissertation, I was both the teacher and the researcher. “Teacher researcher has its roots in action research” (Johnson, 1993). Action research is a “deliberate, solution-orientated investigation” that is generally characterized by a problem identification, data collection, reflection, analysis, data driven action and problem redefinition (Johnson, 1993). In this study, I incorporated new pedagogical practices within advisory to increase my knowledge in hope to improve teaching and learning for myself as well as the girls within my advisory.

### **Setting**

Again, PAC is a small independent public school that serves “at-risk” students from a midsized capital city in the northeast and surrounding urban-ring communities. There were 142 students who attended PAC, the majority being from the capital of the state.

### **Participants**

The study group consisted of ten students, eight second year students and two first year students. All of these girls have been retained at least one year in school. The group contains four thirteen year olds, three fourteen year old, two fifteen year olds and one sixteen year old. Six of the girls were Latina while four were Black. All

of the students received free lunch. Three students resided in City Two while seven live in City One.

I was also a participant during the study. Being a teacher, I tended to be seen as having a more powerful position among the group's social relations. Along with this, I am a white, middle class, female from a small city adjacent to City One which contributes to social distance.

CHAPTER 4  
FINDINGS  
PART ONE: COMMUNITY

**The Importance of Care**

There is a lot of controversy surrounding the concept of care in education. While there is some skepticism around the concept of caring and the impact on student learning, the girls within my advisory group all indicated that the caring environment enabled them to grow. In this chapter, I argue that an all-girls advisory creates a unique community of caring, where girls are able to build a community of trust with peers and with me. As discussed earlier, all students at PAC are randomly assigned to one of the thirteen advisory groups at the beginning of the academic year. These students then stay with the same advisor during their time at PAC, generally two years. Almost all advisories at PAC are co-educational, meaning they have both girls and boys in the group. All advisories, that is, except mine. Creating an effective advisory community is essential to the development and sustainability of the advisory group. During the formative months of a beginning advisory group, it is important to take the time to build a cohesive community. I argue that an effective advisory group is grounded in care, accountability, and empowerment which can be attained more readily through a single sex advisory. In order to understand the connection between an all-girls advisory and a strong, caring community, it is essential to understand the benefits of single sex grouping in schools.



## **Single sex groupings**

In this study, I argue that the single sex, all-girls advisory group increased the students' academic and social success at PAC. Since the 1970's there has been significant research conducted into the relative effectiveness of single sex schooling and grouping (Brutsaert and Van Houtte, 2004). Over the past two decade, single gender grouping within a co-education school has become more normalized especially in independent and private schools (Deak, 1998). While this is true, it is also known that several public schools have also attempted to create single sex groupings but generally with less success because of the administrative challenges. Deak (1998) acknowledges that one of the challenges that public schools face when creating single sex groups is "charges of discrimination by the American Civil Liberties Union" (p. 20). This is unfortunate. There has been a plethora of studies that have shown the benefits of single sex groupings. For instance, "the reports about all girls classes both in the public and private schools, and a recent survey of such schools, indicates that these classes have proven successful" (Deak 1998, p. 20).

According to Belitski in Deak (1998):

The classroom atmosphere is more productive...girls are aggressively exploring with manipulatives, measuring, and problem solving, and becoming divergent thinkers. This school year the girls' math class has increased three times form its original size (p.20-21).

Interestingly, Veal, Director of Communication at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy reported similar findings when investigating the impact of the all-

girls math class. According to Veal in Deak (1998), students in the all-female classes displayed greater performance-level growth on quizzes, homework, and class exams than did females in the co-educational sections taught by the same teacher (p. 20-21).

Both of these examples, while based in mathematics courses, show there are measurable benefits to single sex grouping. This is not a unique finding. In 1999, Singh and Vaught in their comparative study of two single sex and two co-educational fifth grade classes found that the girls in the single sex classroom scored significantly higher in mathematics. While a majority of findings point to an increase in performance and productivity in the mathematics and science classes there has been little to no evidence that single sex groupings are beneficial in the humanity classes such as social studies and English language arts (Singh and Vaught, 1999).

This discrepancy in findings may point to the social constructs that exist around the math and sciences and girls. In other words, there have been significant studies that have shown the negative attitudes and beliefs that girls have around success in the math and science classes. According to AAUW (2002), girls enroll in fewer high level mathematics and science courses whereas boys enroll in fewer foreign language, English and fine art courses. I can attest to this. While an undergrad majoring in zoology and mathematics at a mid-sized north eastern university, I found there were very few females in my upper level mathematics courses. There were even less zoology majors taking upper level mathematics courses. Furthermore, in my graduate program I was one of the two women in a class of ten graduate students in biology education.

While there is no significant data on one sex being naturally stronger in a specific subject, there is a preconceived notion that boys are better at math and science while girls are better in the humanities. This argument does not hold up when looking at the data found in the studies above. The girls are thriving in the math and science course when the boys are absent from the picture.

Why are the girls thriving in these environments? Brutsaert and Van Houtte (2004), suggest “some academic and social advantages” among early adolescent girls in single-sex schools (p.58). During early adolescence, girls gain a greater need for social acceptance while boys develop a more intense academic drive. The increase desire for social acceptance causes adolescence girls to experience greater levels of stress (Brutsaert and Van Houttee 2004, p. 59).

Stress Research uses social psychological factors to determine stress levels and is linked to perceived social support and/or sense of belonging. Brutsaert and Van Houtte (2004) found that in general girls have greater levels of stress than boys. More specifically, girls in co-educational schools have higher stress levels whereas girls in a single-sex schools (or class) have substantially lower levels of stress (Brutsaert and VanHoutte, 2004). These lower levels of stress may be connected to the student’s sense of belonging. In conclusion, Brutsaert and Van Houtte (2004) found that “socially supportive schooling environment fosters academic motivation and acceptance of educational values” (p. 69).

It is still unclear to me if in the absence of stress the girls develop a greater academic drive than the boys or if the academic drive become neutral and boys are more immune to academic stress at this age.

I am not arguing that a fully immersed all-girls education is successful for all girls, but I will say that having a space where single sex grouping can occur will enable some girls to build a greater sense of self and increase academic motivation. This was the type of space I created in my all-girls advisory. This is the type of space that was needed for us all to care.

### **Building Community, Creating Culture**

“I remember looking around on the first day of school thinking that all of the groups were gonna be just girls, or just boys, they weren’t” (Ruthy, Interview April 12, 2011). Ruthy, like the other girls in my advisory group knew they were in a different type of advisory group from the first day of school. They were the only advisory group of just girls in the school of 140 other students. As stated earlier, the girls in my advisory group were randomly selected from the girls on my academic team. Like them, I did not know what to expect on day one of school. It was one of the exciting parts, getting to know the group of girls and creating our community together.

During our first meeting, we all sat in a circle. The quietness hung over the group as they sized each other up. No one really knew what to expect. It was my job

to create a community out of these ten girls. I had a beautifully written curriculum but the girls were the ones that brought life to the group. They were the group.

The first trimester we used an essential question to guide our work together; what is a community? This essential question was presented to the group on day one of our advisory. I asked the girls to write, on a sticky note, what their definition of a community was and share it with the group. Many of the students connected the idea of a community with their neighborhood (September 2010).

- “People that live and work around my house”
- “Who I live near”
- “My neighbors”
- “Everything”
- “Providence, south side”

I could see from their answers that many of them had not thought of the notion of a classroom community. This showed me that I had a lot of work to do in order to create the type of environment I had envisioned during my long days of summer planning.

During the summer months of 2010 preceding our advisory, I rearranged my advisory curriculum to include topics that were relevant in the students’ daily lives. Oliva in Marazno (1982) defined a curriculum as a “plan or program for experiences which a learned encounters under the direction of the school” (p. 106). It was essential for me to think about our curriculum and make some clear and conscious decisions about our purpose together what we need to cover in order to meet our

advisory goals. It is clear that the learning and experiences are enhanced when a teacher identifies the specific focus and purpose and communicates these foci to the group. My goal was to create a strong advisory experience which would enable the students to increase their knowledge and skills to negotiate and navigate the world around them.

While creating my curriculum I looked to understand what the students, girls, needed to know and be able to do at the end of our time together. It was my goal to establish a shared vision early in the school year with the girls to increase their connection to the group and see the relevance of our work together. Therefore, the curriculum I created could be seen as unveiling the hidden curriculum I worked towards in my science classes.

In science, I was teaching scientific skills and knowledge with an underlying tone of socialization and community. For my advisory group, I was clearly focusing on the concept of creating an effective community to enhance the students both academic and social experiences. I was teaching directly into what it means to be a part of a whole, what healthy effective groups do in order to accomplish their goals, how to work together to solve individual problems, and what it means to understand themselves and others.

The key words for our advisory group were: Community, Learner, Growth, Academic, and Social. All of these words were essential to the idea of elevating students and increasing relationships. Our advisory essential question enabled the students and I to frame our year together. Our essential question was: Academically

and socially, how does your community influence you and how do you influence your community? Again, I wanted the students to gain a clear understand of how a community, in school and out, could work together towards common goals and increase their understanding of self both academically and socially.

Main Topics	Subtopics/ activities	Guiding Questions
Community- trimester 1 and 2 (Invigoration can be included in this category)	Norms/ group rules Community Building Cooperative Learning Teamwork New games/ games Ropes course Multiple Perspectives How to have a conversation Group Field trip Community Service Competitions( in and between advisor groups) Community Projects Group goals	Exp: What is a community?
World perspectives- trimester 3 (Cultural Studies)	Stereotypes Sexism Racism Classism Dominate Ideology- (SCWAMP) Cultural Awareness Varies Perspectives **Hollywood and Disney movies work well to illustrate some of these topics along with popular books (i.e. "Mean Girls" and "Beauty and the Beast").	Exp: How does the world around us influence our learning and our understanding of self?

In the chart on the previous page, were my proposed topics for each trimester along with the guiding question. Having the essential and guiding question helped the students and me stay on track and answer the question, “why are we doing this?”

Along with this curriculum map there was also the need to form an authentic community. I knew that the classroom culture needed to be constructed authentically by the group although it was important for me to establish routines and structures before the group could build the culture. For instance, when the girls arrived each morning I would have a morning note on our board. I created a routine for the girls to follow when they entered the room. The first step of our advisory would be to read and reply to the morning message. What seemed to be a simple task turned into something that the girls could depend on daily. It was used to set the tone for our advisory group as well as for the day. The types of questions asked ranged from very safe and non-threatening at first to enable the girls to build trust among the group to higher risk questions. An example of one of the questions used in September 2010 asked the girls what their favorite pizza topping was. The reason we started with questions that were considered non-threatening was to create a safe space for all girls to feel comfortable and willing to participate. These questions grew in intensity over time and enabled us to have deeper conversations. For instance, after January 2011, once a strong community of trust was created, we were able to ask questions around stereotypes. Students were able to use their experiences to shape the conversation and understand the world around them. The question asked at the beginning of advisory group was “has anyone ever been stereotyped?” This question led to an engaging conversation.



An example of a conversation from January 17, 2011 advisory group:

Carey: As you all know, we have been talking about stereotypes the last few days in advisory. What is a stereotype? Has anyone ever been stereotyped?

Bia: Like, ummm, people say I can't play basketball because I'm short.

Lyt: Yup, true, true.

Bia: I'm real good at basketball. Don't mean to brag.

Carey: Why do people have this stereotype?

Cora: Because of the way she looks. They think she is short.

Brownie: And it makes them feel good about themselves when they make somebody else feel bad.

Mayra: Yeah, they do that.

Lyt: So they feel good when they make others feel bad.

Carey: How does this hurt the person being stereotyped?

Brownie: It makes them think they can't do something.

Lyt: It doesn't hurt, it is just hate.

Bia: Yeah, hate don't hurt.

Carey: No? Does it hurt the person that is stereotyping?

Cora: Yeah, people probably be like, that's stupid! People won't talk to them anymore.

Bia: Stereotypes are stupid!

This conversation showed how the students were able to negotiate the topic of stereotyping together and make sense of it. The girls talked to each other, listened to each other, and responded in an appropriate way. This conversation shows true dialogue and points to an active community dissecting a real life case of stereotyping. More conversations like this followed once our group community norms and routines were established.

Once the girls read the message, they would all take a place in our daily circle. Before advisory group, I would place all the chairs in a circle away from the tables to ensure all of us would sit together to create the sense of community. Sitting in a circle, where we could all see each other and interact together, established a sense of space and self among the group. Students knew they were a part of the whole. On September 25, 2010, I asked the students "why do we sit in a circle."

Bia: If we are in a circle, we talk to each other. We know each other better and discover a lot of things that we have in common with other people.

Ruthy: It helps us see each other

Cara: It's a nice way to start our day

From these two simplistic routines, morning note and sitting in a circle, the girls began to create an advisory community.

The creation of an authentic advisory culture was established over time. This is important because without a strong classroom culture in place students would not have attained the desired outcome. Our positive advisory culture had the ability to influence the students' lives in different ways. Bia described our group as a place she felt she could "talk freely." Coral mentioned it "helped make her day better." While Jazzy noted that even though we were all different, we did not care. These three ladies provide insight into the feeling that advisory provided them with. They were accepted, open, and themselves during a time in their lives when that was not always possible. These feelings established the community we needed in order to feel safe, productive, and accountable.

It wasn't long before I began to see a strong group forming from the ten strangers in the room. The group had begun to notice the small "stuff" and expresses concern for each other.

### **Sharing is Caring**

The student showed signs of caring for each other's well-being early within our advisory year. There has been a great deal of research on the concept of care in school which mainly points to the teacher as the care giver. I will discuss the Teacher as Caring concept later in this chapter. Here, however, I will show how the students created a caring community for each other with my guidance. In other words, and in more familiar terms, they became friends.

Friendship for middle school girls is very important socially and developmentally (Blume and Zembar, 2010). These friendships were constructed during our advisory time and grew over the girls' educational experiences.

Studies have shown that positive peer relationships, friendship, can lead to greater academics success. Nelson and DeBacker (2008) discovered a positive correlation between students who experience positive relationships with their peers and academic success. This has been connected to the "considerable influence over the psychological well-being of young adults" from positive peer relationships (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Similarly, other studies have indicated that students who friend other students that have a negative perception of school tend to reject school and are more likely to perform poorly academically (Veronneau, Vitaro, Pederson, & Tremblay, 2008). All in all, the research points to the number of impacts peer relations have on students' academic success both positive and negative.

Furthermore, Burdsal and Jacobson (2012) found that gender played a significant role in interpreting social impact on academic success. "Girls scored higher on social support than boys," meaning that peer relations influences the girls' perception of schooling and in turn could have a greater positive or negative impact on academic achievement (Burdsal and Jacobson, 2012, p. 8). In other words, girls benefit from positive peer relationships which influence their academic success. This is important to my study because the students in my advisory were destined to become friends because of the hours spent with each other and the familiarity of the group.

Knowing the impact that friendship can have on the girls led me to want to understand what these friendships look like and how could I support these

relationships. Ormrod (2010) argues that peer relationships, friendships, provide a safe area where students can practice many different social skills, including cooperation, negotiation, self-control, compromise, and conflict resolution. Peer relationships also provide the girls with social and emotional support. Once a friendship is established, girls tend to express themselves with each other differently than boys. Adolescent girls tend to reveal their “their innermost thoughts and feelings to their friends” (Ormond, 2010, p. 1). Actually, once girls reach puberty, they rely on their peers more than adults to provide social and emotional support, especially in times of confrontation or confusion (Ormrod, 2010). Friends are also able to share common interests or concerns which enables the girls to discover they are not alone in their feelings. The students, in my advisory, shared experiences daily to increase their understanding of each other and the world around them. These shared experiences helped create strong friendships that lasted over the course of their time at PAC and beyond. One common trend that can be seen from the data collected is that the students cared for each other. They shared in each other strengths and helped each other through hard times.

Friendships grow over time but establishing strong group dynamics should start right away. In September 2010, I established a time that the girls could ask questions about advisory in hopes to understand it better.

Some of the questions posed by the students September 2010 were:

“Why do we have advisory?”

“Why don’t we have advisory every day?”

“Carey, can you dance?”

“Why do I love Carey so much?”

“What is the point of advisory?”

All of these questions were written on post-it notes and placed in a bowl to decrease the personal risk of asking a question and increase participation. We then took each question and I asked the students to answer them. Here is a sample of their responses

Why do we have advisory: “It is a chance for us to talk as a group”

“To help focus us academically”

“To help us”

Why don't we have advisory every day: “Too much of a good thing could not work”

“We have other classes”

Why do I love Carey so much: “Because she listens”

“She makes us happy”

“She's nice to us”

These questions allowed us to all enter a discourse which enabled us to have a constructive conversation about the point of our group. This allowed me to hear from the girls what their perception of our group was. Many of their responses strengthened my belief that the girls did enjoy our time together and thought it was valuable.

As our group trust and connection grew so did our conversations. On September 24, 2010 our group was faced with our first, of many, difficult conversations.

During a content class, Mayra had her second confrontation with a particular teacher. This was a big one! She had a lot going on outside of school. Since being hospitalized and in a group home for over three months, she had gotten better but was

still very fragile! One teacher was upset that Mayra was not doing his work in class but was choosing to do some other class work. He told her to put her work away. She got angry. He told her she would not act in his class how she “acts on the street corner.” It is unclear what the teacher actually meant by this sentence but street corner has different connotations in urban and rural areas.

Granted, he did not know her mother was a prostitute. In my eyes, this is sexism in the works. He might not have meant it in the prostitute way, but there was an underlying notion. In the city prostitutes can be found on the street corner, which is directly related to this sexist remark. Adding the word “corner” to this phrase makes it that much worse although I think even suggesting that students do not act the way they do in the streets is also very derogatory. At this point, as you can guess, Mayra went off and asked if he was calling her a “ho.” He then asked Mayra, “who the hell she thought she was?” How is this empowering? This question sent her into a whole new level of frustration. He used his authority to belittle her in front of her peers. Some of those peers were our advisory members.

After the class, Lyt and Bia found me to tell me what they had just witnessed in class. The girls called an emergency advisory group meeting. Since we only met three days per week for longer advisories we talked about if there was ever a need to meet we could use my room at lunch. This was definitely a time students needed to come together and discuss what had happened, how they felt, and ways to support Mayra.

During our lunch, the girls reenacted the story for those who were not there. Many of the girls were upset that Mayra was talked to in that way and needed to

understand why a teacher would do that to her. It was my place to listen and let the conversation happen among the girls. Mayra talked to the girls about how her mother was a prostitute and got “all messed up on drugs and stuff.” Mayra was taken away from her mother at a young age and raised by her grandmother. The girls connected, bonded with each other and vowed to keep Mayra’s secrets. Mayra felt safe with the group. The group made her calm.

After our meeting with the girls, I got involved and told the director of the school and the teacher exactly how I felt but they both did not see this comment as sexist. The teacher explained he meant the way she acts outside of school with her friends. This just strengthened my feeling of how engrained sexism is in our culture. This also strengthened my objectives within advisory.

This situation launched our advisory off into a different direction before we had all of the tools to understand our relationships. On the other hand, it increased the level of care within the group and created a strong bond three weeks into school.

Over time, the group began to negotiate relationships with each other and with me. During the one-on-one interviews April 12, 2011, many of the students spoke about how much they were connected to our group. Much of this data was also used to show how the students were accountable to each other which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Accountability and community are connected.

One particular interview in April took a different direction. During this interview, both Enu and I developed a different set of questions based on circumstances. Enu was pregnant. She was fourteen years old. She was scared.



In December 2010, Enu found out she was pregnant. She was living with her grandmother at the time and dating a man who was much older than her. When Enu first told me about her pregnancy, she and I cried together. She was not happy with herself, she “wanted to be something” (December 16, 2010). After being out for almost two weeks, and quite sick, she decided she needed to tell the advisory group. Enu expressed that this was a difficult conversation to have with the girls, “I don’t want them to think I am one of those girls who wanna get pregnant, I want a life” (December 16, 2010). We talked about this concept and I suggested her being “real” with the group and letting them in on what was going on and how she felt about the whole situation.

December 17, 2010, we devoted forty five minutes to have a conversation with the advisory group.

Carey: Today we need to have a serious conversation as a group. It is important that what we say here stays here. We have created a community together built on respect and trust. Enu, are you ready?

Enu: I want you all to know....The reason I have been out so much lately is because I’m pregnant.

Cara: I knew it! Not in a bad way.

Enu: I want you to know that I did not plan this and I’m scared.

Carey: Enu has offered to answer any questions you may have about her pregnancy.

This opened up the opportunity for the girls to ask Enu questions about her pregnancy in order to understand and negotiate the particular challenge that Enu, along with many other teenage girls, face. Ashee was the first to ask a question.

Ashee: Do you feel any different?

Enu: Not really. Well, except for puking and getting sick a lot.

Bia: What did you mom say?

Enu: My mom punched me in the face. I live with my grandmother, my mom won't talk to me now unless I get married.

Mayra: When are you due?

Enu: July, I am gonna finish the school year.

Cara: You betta!

The conversation went on for some time. There were tears, stories of other friends or family members they know, and then it turned to prevention.

Enu: It was stupid. He told me he had a condom on, he lied. Don't let anyone do that to you ever!

There was a lot said in that conversation that I needed to follow up on, the physical aggression with the mom as well as the boyfriend not being honest with her. These were conversations we would have in private. This advisory conversation shows that the students care for each other's well-being. The girls were able to bond over the important dialogue and understand each other on a new level, again increasing their connection, friendship, and care.

April 12, 2011, we began our interview together, but as stated before, the tone changed. She expressed gratitude towards the group for helping her in a time when she needed it the most.

Carey: What do you like about our girls advisory?

Enu: There are no boys who annoy us, we all get along.

Carey: As a second year, what do you notice about this year?

Enu: They are supportive, less drama, more helpful than last year

Enu: The group has helped with a lot this year. They watch what I eat, they make sure I come to school, and if I don't come to school they get my work.

Carey: How did that make you feel?

Carey: When they took cupcakes out of your hand and gave you water.

Enu: At first I was mad but then it makes sense. They care. They ask me if I ate breakfast and really care. Ya know?

Carey: Why? How? Explain to me.

Enu: They tell me I can do anything! I was really emotional, and they listened and helped me be ok with having a baby.

Carey: How would you describe our group?

Enu: AWESOME! Pure awesome! They care, ya know? We care about each other, you care about us.

Enu felt connected to the group. She needed the girls to help her through what was one of the most difficult challenges in her life. The friendship and respect we created as a group enabled us to have this conversation with each other and help dissect one of the many stressors in a teenage girl's life.

Enu and Mayra offered an opportunity for our group to discuss topics that might not be part of a traditional co-educational advisory group or maybe any advisory group. The girls felt comfortable with each other and wanted to be supportive and helpful.

Along with this, February 13, 2011, during a Monday advisory group another difficult conversation emerged. Mayra was upset and wanted to talk to the group. Her sister and she were both molested in the past and she was having some reoccurring memories since her mother had come back into her life. Mayra talked about how her mother would “shoot up” and let her uncle into their bedrooms. Instantly, Coral began to cry hysterically. She was so upset by the conversation. I mentioned to the girls that this was a difficult topic and let’s take a moment to think about what others may be feeling. Coral, finally spoke.

Coral: I am so sorry you went through that. I don’t want any of you to ever feel bad.

Bia: Why are you crying?

Coral: Because I care about you guys, you are my friends and it is not fair you had to feel bad.

Coral expressed extreme empathy towards Mayra’s story. I believe this empathy was rooted in strong ties to the group and feelings of friendship. Coral, along with the other girls in the group, created a safe place where caring and understanding was the premise of the conversation.

The space created by the girls in the advisory set a specific culture within our class, one of caring and friendship. They trusted in each other to help and understand

the world around them. This classroom was different than any other they had experienced before but was conclusive to the evidence around single-sex groupings and creating a common community grounded in core beliefs about themselves and others.

### **Care Bear: The role of the teacher in caring**

I believe that students need to have a caring relationship with an adult in order to succeed academically and socially especially at the middle grades level. Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher defines caring as the very Being of human life (Noddings, 2005). By Heidegger's broad definition of caring, it becomes clear that caring is a part of life, the "ultimate reality of life" (Noddings 2005).

Caring within schools is not often talked about as an essential element. Noddings (2002) finds that many young people "fail to develop the capacity to care, but also seem not to know what it means to be cared for" (p. 25). It was my place as an educator and an advisor to establish a culture that held care as a center point for our time together. For teenagers, being cared for is often a prerequisite of caring for others.

It is important for me to acknowledge that my role in the group greatly influenced how the group ran and what the culture ultimately became. I was not just an observer, I was a member of the advisory. I facilitated the instruction, and in the beginning, set the tone for the advisory group. The group saw me as a caring member of the community.

One of the essential components of being cared for is the concept that it will last over time. Students need “the security of knowing that particular adults will be a positive presence in their lives over time” (Nodding, 2002, p. 26). The foundation of the relationship developed is deep trust established over time. This relationship is founded on the basic human needs of care and continuity (Nodding, 2002).

It is also important to make the distinction of being cared about versus being cared for. “Caring about” and “caring for” are two different concepts. In, *Caring* (1984), Nodding begins to distinguish the differences.

I have brushed of aside “caring about” and I believe, properly so. It is too easy. I can “care about” the starving children of Cambodia, send five dollars to hunger relief, and feel somewhat satisfied. I do not know if my money went for food, or guns, or a new Cadillac for some politician. This is a poor second cousin to caring. “Caring about” always involves a certain benign neglect. One is attentive just so far. One assents with just so much enthusiasm. One acknowledges. One affirms. One contributes five dollars and goes on to other things (p. 112).

This distinction made me realize that I needed to change my thinking about care. I did not just care about the students in my advisory group. I cared for students in the group. With this shift in language came a shift in thinking.

Throughout history, women have been seen as the care givers. I did not want to simply slip back into gender norms but instead create an authentic space where caring for contributed to academic and social growth for the girls.

During the course of our 2010-2011 academic year, I created a culture that cared. Early in the school year, the girls and I began to celebrate our successes as a family. The first celebration came after our big win at field day. As discussed earlier, the girls won the Advisory Olympics in September 2010. The girls were very proud of their early success as a group and in response to the victory we decided to have a pizza party. At lunch, the girls gathered in our advisory room to eat and laugh together. After this lunch, sharing meals became part of our norm. The girls and I made it a point to have weekly lunches together outside of our scheduled advisory time. These lunches were optional, but all the girls attended. The casual lunch time enabled the group to bond in a different way since it was not a traditional type setting. Lunch with the girls was fun, they enjoyed their time together.

December 22, 2010, right before holiday break, PAC had a half day. I decided it would be wonderful to be able to bring my advisory group out for a nice meal at a local restaurant, a restaurant many of the students would not have ever been to before. The weeks leading up to the outing, I contacted the parents and asked permission for the girls to stay after dismissal for our field trip, they all agreed. The key was to keep the outing a secret until the girls and I arrived at the restaurant.

On December 22, 2010 the girls and I walked over to the restaurant for our lunch reservation for eleven. The girls were so excited when they saw where we were going. Over the next hour and a half, we laughed and ate together like a family. Again, this experience brought our group together outside of the traditional four walls of the classroom. By celebrating like a family, the girls trusted me and knew that I cared for them. I did finance this trip for the girls and felt it was an important step in

our community building relationship. This enabled them to care for each other and showed that I cared for them.

There were other ways in which I showed my students that I cared for them. I made it a point to call students at home when they missed a day of school. This is not general practice at PAC. Generally, the school administrative assistant would call the homes to verify why the student was absent. My call was different. I would call to check in on the student, to ensure that they were alright and let them know we, as a group, and I specifically were concerned about them and missed them in school. At first, the students responded differently to my calls since this practice was so new to them. For example, in early December 2010, Enu was absent for two days in a row. When I called her home, her grandmother was defensive explaining that Enu was sick and that I should not check up on her. I talked to Enu's grandmother and explained why I was calling, because I cared that Enu was missing school. This new relationship, one based in care, was something that the grandmother was not used to and therefore needed time to understand. Once she understood that I was not calling for any type of truancy issues, our conversations were much more pleasant and felt less judgmental. It was important for me to talk with the parents when possible to understand what the students needed in order to be successful.

In November of 2010, Mayra was hospitalized yet again for her cutting. Since this was during the beginning of the school year I was very concerned about her ability to miss school and stay attached to the group and her learning. When Mayra was admitted on November 12<sup>th</sup>, I received a phone call on my personal number from her grandmother asking if she could put me on the visitation list for Mayra at the hospital.



As heartbroken as I was to hear Mayra was in the hospital, I was also touched by the fact that she, her grandmother and Mayra, wanted me on the visitation list.

During the school day, I gathered material to bring to Mayra in the hospital from all of her teachers. I was concerned for Mayra both academically and socially. I did not want her to fall too far behind. After school, I went over to the hospital with her school work in hand and spent time with Mayra going over her school work and talking about the girls in advisory. I assured Mayra I would be back in two days to pick up the work. It was important for me to let Mayra know she was cared for and that I would be a constant person in her life.

Two days later, I went back to visit Mayra. This time with snacks and a large poster sized card from our advisory group. I did not tell the girls why Mayra was in the hospital again, it was not my place to disclose this information but I did let the girls know that Mayra needed to feel happy. The card meant so much to Mayra, she and I shared some tears during this visit.

When Mayra returned to school in late November, she was withdrawn. I ate lunch with her daily, along with a few girls from our advisory. Taking the time to assimilate her back into the school setting made Mayra feel safe and cared for. She was making progress yet her home life was erupting.

Mayra was placed in a group home in a neighboring city. I would pick her up to go to school and drop her off at the end of the day. During our drives, Mayra and I would talk about our days and about the group home. She was scared, her life was different. She did not have any privacy in the home and often felt targeted by others in the group home. I knew it was important for Mayra to have specific routines and

structures at school more than ever. She was resisting many of the rules and guidelines at school, began smoking cigarettes outside of school, and ran away twice from the group home. Her grandmother had given up on her and the PAC was ready to do the same.

I fought to keep Mayra at PAC for the school year. Mayra needed us; she needed the group, the school, the consistency in her life. Mayra did not have a successful academic year at PAC but she did make some positive changes. For example, she was getting the treatment she needed to deal with cutting herself, she made a group of friends that cared about her, and she found an adult she could confide in.

Enu, on the other hand had a different challenge. She was fourteen and pregnant with an older man's child. Enu benefited from the advisory group but also from the relationship that she and I developed. Over the course of the year, while pregnant, Enu continued to come to school often. She did however fall behind. She was not going to make it to the tenth grade without my help. I offered to tutor her in the summer of 2011 in order for her to earn credit for ninth grade English, social studies and math. Twice a week I would pick her up from her aunt's house in the projects and bring her to the local library. During these sessions, we would work together to gain the skills she needed to go into the tenth grade come fall.

Enu worked hard those summer days and expressed that she could not have done it without me. To this day, Enu still calls me often and talks about how she is doing in school and working towards her dream of becoming a nurse. She credits this

to us working hard that summer at the library. The care that I showed for Enu enabled her to be successful even during a time that was trying in many ways.

Just listening and being there for the girls shows that they were cared for. Advocating for them, celebrating with them, and being an active part of their lives helps them navigate the world around them. I believe that the relationships formed in our advisory group enabled the girls to be both academically and socially successful.

As a group, we would reflect on report cards and progress reports eight times a year. During these sessions, I asked the girls to reflect on what was going well and areas of improvement. These reflections were shared with the group and charted. I helped the girls understand the importance of goal setting and worked with them to change any negative academic grades. This showed the girls that I cared for their academic success.

As a group, we did have some intense conversations. It is important to note that the girls knew if anything came out of our conversations I could, and would, refer to the social workers if applicable. I was not careless in letting the girls know that nothing would be shared. It is my responsibility as an educator to always keep the best interest of my students at the forefront of my thinking. In retrospect, this could have disabled some conversation from some members of the advisory group to fully develop but it is a reality that we faced on a daily basis. For example, I wonder if there was more beyond Coral's tears than just feeling bad for the girls that had experienced sexual abuse. I referred her to the social worker but did not want to pry into this topic.

I worry about the long term impact that this group could have on the members of the advisory. Our advisory was different, it was a special place where we all were able to talk and grow as a community. I worry that I set up an unrealistic bar of future expectation for the girls. I would not be in their lives forever. I did not know what the years ahead would have for them but I cared. My goal was to create strong, young women who would advocate for themselves and develop key relationships built on trust and respect. I fear that my lessons may not have been fully transferable to their future lives. I am unsure if the group dynamics could ever be replicated outside of this advisory or if a reciprocal environment will emerge in the future for these girls. This realization is difficult for me and disheartening. I was a key person in their lives, did I make a difference on a deeper level or were the lessons learned purely subjective to the group at hand.

I also worry about the concept of teacher as savior. I did not want to be the white woman in the urban school caring for the students in order to save them from themselves. PAC, is labeled at risk. Swadner and Lubeck examined the implications and connotations associated with the terminology of being labeled “at risk.” Swadner and Lubeck (1998) address the differences between minority students and white students in education in “Children and families ‘at promise’: Deconstructing the discourse of risk.”

...’at risk’ is framed as an individual attribute (e.g. non-normative development) or set of problems (e.g. a response to environmental and familial circumstances), a psychological and counseling issue, a pedagogical or learning problem or is seen as an institutional and societal problem...Put

another way, there is an emerging ideology of risk, which has embedded in it interpretations of children's deficiencies or likelihood of failure due to environmental, as well as individual, variables. (p.18)

Students who are considered "at risk" are generally educationally and economically disadvantaged and are often isolated from other students to be "fixed." Many minority students within inner city schools are unjustly labeled "at risk." PAC students come from the most economically challenged neighborhood in the state (Brosnan, 1997). Besides academic difficulties, many of the students have experienced attendance issues, family instability, low self-esteem, problems with drugs and or alcohol (Brosnan, 1997). This type of environment can perpetuate the concept of teacher as savior.

Giroux's (1997) critique of *Dangerous Minds* speaks to the concept of teacher as savior, especially white teacher in an urban setting. The film *Dangerous Minds* is about a white teacher who begins teaching in an urban school that uses unconventional methods in order to gain her students trust and respect. The film outlines the teacher as a savior for the students. Giroux (1997) argues that the film "attempts to represent 'whiteness' as the archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards" (p. 47). This type of thinking is both archaic and detrimental to the students as well as the teacher. This view of teacher as savior sets up a power dynamic and can create a disempowered group of students.

Ayer's (2001) speaks to the teacher as savior concept in real-life context. "Too many teachers, unfortunately, seem to see their role as rescuer" (Ayers 2001, p. 79). It is important to value the students for who they are and not where they come from

while not considering their religious, cultural, and socioeconomic status as misfortunate. It was important for me to keep this in my mind throughout the study, I am a teacher, I do not know all, I am here with the students, not just for the students.

I needed to be aware of these at all times. One of the goals was to help the girls understand themselves and the world around us, not to depend upon one person to save them. I often critique the techniques and strategies I used to create the group dynamics to ensure that I was not seen with all the answers and that the ideas and voices of the group were heard equally.

## FINDINGS

### PART TWO: SUCCESS

#### **Success for All?**

Students who attend PAC are already deemed “unsuccessful” in a traditional school setting. They come in to PAC already branded. As stated earlier, students at PAC have been retained at least once in school. Their retention has shaped their view on school and the school’s view of them. However, my data shows that these students, in my advisory, come to define school success in a different way.

In this section, I argue that the students in my advisory came in with traditional ideas about academic success – a model in which they had explicitly failed. But in the course of our advisory, they came to see success as more holistic which gave them confidence to master the traditional modes more successfully. First, I am going to show how the girls in my advisory discovered how to use their voices and advocate for themselves within the academic setting which led to greater academic success. Secondly, I will show that through advisory, the girls gained a sense of accountability to themselves and the advisory group that led to greater academic success.

Traditionally academic success is usually equated to academic achievement. Academic achievement is generally tied to class grades, GPA, standardized test scores, and assimilation into school norms (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). In a traditional

middle school, students are judged by their test scores, class grades, and overall performance. The state school department commends schools for their academic performance annually, especially after the state's standardized test scores. Schools and students are ranked on their academic performance. These standardized tests last approximately three days, or eight testing sessions, and follow students for their full academic career. Aspinwall (2008) noted how "progress is measured by an accumulation of correct answers on time-constrained tests" (p. 28). This in and of itself seems faulty that a snapshot in a student's career is tied to their overall performance. I am not arguing the validity of these tests or the necessity of them but rather the impact they have on students who are deemed underachievers through traditional measures.

Our current climate of educational testing can be directly connected to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The initial goal of NCLB was to ensure quality education for all students. NCLB indicated a target date of 2014 for every child to be competent as measured by a standardized test (Meier et al., 2004). While this target is commendable, it is not doable. Standardized tests are not meant to have 100% of the test taking population at one hundred percent proficiency. In 2004, Darling- Hammond found a "fundamental problem" with creating a hundred percent proficiency as a target goal. "It is impossible to attain 100% proficiency levels for students on norm-references tests." (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, Wood, 2004 p. 54). The idea behind a norm-referenced test is that fifty percent of all students should fall below the norm while fifty percent should score above the norm. In general, standardized tests provide data to enable the teachers to strengthen their



practice. They are not meant to determine if a student is proficient. As a result of this high stakes testing, some “states are now retaining, by law, elementary students if they do not pass a standardized test” (Meier et al., 2004). Similarly, older students are being retained, or held back in grade, to avoid testing (Meier et al., 2004). When schools are judged on how well students perform on standardized tests, some students are encouraged not to take the test. This is because the state and federal departments of education then use these standardized test scores to track a school’s annual yearly progress.

The PAC’s state the standardized test is criterion references as opposed to norm references. Criterion referenced tests determine “what students can do and what they know, not how they compare to other students” (Anastasi 1988, p. 102). In other words, the purpose of a criterion references test is to determine whether each student has achieved specific skills over the academic school year. Students are given individual scores which are preset against an already determined standard and irrelevant to other’s performance (Bond 1996).

Adequate yearly progress, or AYP, is the set rate of improvement that a school must make on the annual standardized tests in order for the school to reach the 100% proficiency goal in the time frame dictated (Meier et al., 2004). Students must meet AYP targets in as many as ten different categories (Meier et al., 2004). Each category contains two mandates: “95 percent of the students in each group must take the test, and each group must make its annual AYP target, which is the steadily rising percentage of passing students needed to stay on pace to reach 100 percent by 2014” (Meier et al. 2004, p. 56). Meier et al. (2004) states that even the “criteria for making

‘adequate yearly progress’ toward that goal are such that ‘virtually no school serving large number of lower-income children will clear these arbitrary hurdles’” (85). In other words, many schools which are highly effective will be deemed failing if they do not make AYP. One of the hurdles is that ninety five percent of the students participate in the test (Kohn 2004, p. 85). This target may not be attainable in large schools for various reasons.

This has led to a deliberate change in curriculum, especially in the month or so leading up to the standardized test. According to Neill (2004), “they will promote bad educational practices and deform curricula in significant ways. In the end, they will lower, not raise, standards for most students” (p. 103).

For example, at PAC, teachers of all subjects were asked to put their curriculum aside and do “test prep” with the students every day. The English and social studies teachers concentrated on reading and writing while the mathematics and science teachers focused on math problem solving and multiple choice techniques and practice. Other classes such as art and music are often sacrificed. This change in curricula does not assess the needs of all learner nor promote higher order learning.

Besides wanting students to do well for the sake of doing well, teacher and school have a direct accountability to the state and federal departments of education if students underperform on the standardized tests. PAC teachers’ evaluations, like others in the state, will be tied to the state standardized test results. Testing has not only been tied to the school ranking but now teachers could also lose their teaching certification since standardized tests account for fifty-one percent of the teacher’s annual evaluation.

Another reason for this change in curriculum was because of the fear the administration felt of being labeled for not reaching the targeted AYP. According to Darling-Hammond (2004) “Schools that miss any target for two consecutive years get out on the ‘needs improvement’ list and face sanctions” (p. 54). During this time, schools must use part of their federal funding to transfer students as necessary. If a school misses a target three years in row, the school will face “corrective action” while four years brings “reconstitution,” year five equals “reconstruction” (Meier et al., 2004). Those who support NCLB claim the tests and sanctions help increase school improvement and accountability. This is based on a system of rewards and sanction, which has been proven ineffective and inequitable in classrooms. Why does the whole educational system work this way? “Under AYP, the only thing that counts is the number of students who score above the passing level on state tests” (Meier 2004, p. 55). This in and of itself minimizes learning for understanding and personal growth.

Wood (2004), when reflecting on the No Child Left Behind Act, notes that “today, children of color and children of the poor still do not fare as well as their wealthier, white counterparts” (p. viii). One of the reasons for this may be a discrepancy in the funding for schools. In 2004, schools located in poor, urban areas allocate about \$3000 per student while wealthy schools are able to allocate up to \$30,000 per student (Meier, 2004). Though funding has increased in urban districts per pupil it is still well behind what wealthier schools allocate per child. Schools that do not meet AYP are often poor, inner city. Many students are disabled because of this system. The achievement gap still exists, even with the NCLB act of 2001 mandating success for all.

Revisiting NCLB ten years after implementation, in 2012, still has not yielded the intended results of all students performing proficiently on standardized tests. Holtz-Eakin and Lovejoy (2012) found that two thirds of fourth and eighth grade students are still not performing at a proficient or advanced level. It is also important to note that seventy-five percent of American students graduate high school, meaning twenty-five percent do not (Holtz-Eakin and Lovejoy, 2012). This data is even worse for minority students. This data shows that NCLB has not given educators the resources necessary to make positive changes. According to Mary Bell, in *Education Week*, simply measuring schools success or failure should entail more than one standardized test (2012).

This is important because the students at PAC are children of color and low SES. They are among the students who have yet not benefited from NCLB. It is also important to note that the definition of success put forth by NCLB impacts the students negatively. If a student is not successful on the standardized test, they are deemed unsuccessful by the education system. It is important to accept the notion that education is more than facts and skills. Students need more of a social connection and a socializing experience within the school curriculum and the current testing system inhibits this type of curriculum.

As discussed earlier, socioeconomic status has been directly linked to a student's success. In 2005, Sirin compiled a meta-analytic review of research relating socioeconomic status and academic achievement. His analysis shows that there is in fact a direct correlation between a student's SES and her academic achievement, specifically in math and science. This is important because the students in my

advisory live at or below the current poverty level and, according to Sirin (2005), are already at risk of poor academic achievement and limited academic success.

Valenzuela (1999) noted that academic underachievement is formulated by comparing students' "grades, test scores, drop-out rates, and so on" (p.3). This is important because it helps contextualize my students' academic psyche prior to the advisory program. The girls in my advisory study would be considered academic underachievers through this traditional view. Furthermore, the students viewed themselves as unsuccessful while many experienced distress and disengagement (Kruczak, Alexander, and Harris, 2005).

Before joining our advisory Jazzy noted that she was "not a good student. (I) didn't know what to do or how to do it. No one ever really cared" (Interview April 12, 2011). This lack of caring that Jazzy felt led her to sink further behind in her education. Jazzy became disconnected to her education, she withdrew in classes. Unlike Jazzy, Enu began to act silly in classes just to get attention. She would often get in trouble and was suspended at her other school (Advisory September, 2010). Coral, Lyt, and Jazzy acknowledged that they did the opposite. During our April 12, 2011 interview, Coral stated "(I) got really quiet and would not talk to nobody" while Lyt simply stated she was really quiet in school. On the other hand, Cara showed her lack of connection to her education in a different way, through her attendance. Before attending PAC, Cara was absent "a lot." Her absenteeism put her at risk of truancy. These are just a few of the numerous examples of how the traditional school system silenced our girls.

In 2003, Fine noted that is a silencing signifies a fear to talk. This is one definition of silence. My data shows that the girls in my advisory did not have a fear of talking or a terror of words. Their silence was directly connected to the loss of power the girls felt in the educational setting as defined by Fine and Weis (2003). In most classrooms throughout America, participation is often tied to Accountable Talk in class. Often teachers differentiate a “good” student from a “poor” student by how often they participate in the class. Kim and Markus (2005) discuss the American ideal of classroom participation, “American teachers drawing on their own implicit models of intelligence and education urge these students to participate more, to contribute more, and to talk more” (Fine and Weis 2005, p. 182). It is important to note that this is the dominant view in our educational system, participation is marked by talking. When an individual or group does not express themselves, ask questions, respond to questioning, or show what they know verbally teachers generally believe that the student is disengaged and not learning (Fine and Weis 2005). I argue that the girls in my study did not participate in their classes because they did not know how to do this in a way that benefited them as learners. Early in my teaching career I wondered where the silence stemmed from. This prompted me to do a pilot study looking at how the girls participated in an informal setting when compared to the formal classroom setting.

I observed conversations in the classroom as well as the cafeteria. This data indicated that the girls in the classroom setting, formal setting, participated less often than the girls in the cafeteria, informal setting. The finding within this comparative study unfortunately represent the norm for girls within a classroom.

According to Kutz (1997),

Across levels of schooling, girls are called on less frequently than boys, given shorter turns when they are called on, and offered fewer follow-up questions that ask them to extend their thinking and expand on what they've said and engaged in the kind of oral reconceptualization that supports real learning.

Eventually, many of them stop responding and fall silent (p. 179).

Since the girls at PAC have been educated in traditional schools from kindergarten to seventh or eighth grade, they could be conditioned to this type of learning environment. Mary, in the formal setting, only contributed to five percent of the total turns and four percent of the utterances during conversation. When she spoke, she directed her comments and questions to the teacher as opposed to the group. When I asked her about this, she replied that she was "just askin' a question and didn't think 'bout it much" she also said "who cares really, it's only a stupid question?" The second part of her response made me want to understand why she seemed to get angry or aggravated when I questioned her intent. It also made me wonder, why did she feel a need to address me, was it gender identification, teacher-student relationship or something more?

The fact that Mary chose to address her questions to the teacher as opposed to the other students was both interesting and disturbing but not surprising since she came from a more traditional school where the teacher was the focal point. The formal setting, the classroom, which Mary was in, was not a traditional classroom. The students address the teacher by first name and usually do not raise their hand to speak. Kutz' described this type of classroom as having a more relaxed teacher

authority where the students felt free and comfortable to participate (p. 197).

Although Kutz went on to say that even within the less formal classroom setting the teacher, unknowingly, focused more often on the boys thus inviting more participation (p. 197).

It is important to mention that the study group for the formal conversation consisted of six boys and one girl. In the informal group, the girls and boys turns and utterances were about equal even though the number of girls to boys was still uneven, 33% to 67% respectively.

The differences between the informal and formal data have left me with numerous questions about girls and the classroom. Why is the silence happening and how can it be prevented? This data enabled me to ask the right questions, to understand what it was like to be in a class at PAC, and what it means to participate.

In summary, Enu resorted to acting out in class. Coral, Jazzy and Lyt sank into themselves and became invisible while Cara distanced herself from the setting (Interview October 15, 2010). They were all silenced by the academics system. Beck and Malley (1998) found that, at-risk middle school students do not believe their needs for belonging are met in school. All of these examples are not conducive to academic success especially in a traditional school setting, and support the concept of “othering” within this setting that these girls experienced. The concept of “othering”, noted by Delpit (1995), again speaks to the disconnect that these girls felt within their past educational experiences.

### **Success at PAC**



At PAC, however, students are considered academically successful based on their acquisition of skills, standards, and completion of an accelerated curriculum. I argue this is just another variation of the traditional success model yet it is perceived by students as non-traditional.

Basically, in a traditional school setting, students are given an overall grade for the course generally ranging from A to F or 100 to zero. Within that grade, teachers determine what percentage of the grade will be from tests, quizzes, classwork, participation, and so on. The projects and tests are embedded within this one cumulative grade. At PAC, students receive grades for each of the major standards addressed as well as classwork and participation. The report card clearly displays what students need to know and be able to do in order to be successful. The standards are graded one through four while the classwork and participation grades are a percentage, out of one hundred. Within the tradition model and the PAC model, students are still being assessed using the same conventional methods. The difference is in how it is perceived by the students. The students do not equate the PAC way of grading to the traditional model simply because it looks different and the language is new. At PAC, we refer to students who are passing as being “on pace” referring to the fact they are on pace to complete three grades in two years. By naming the exact projects that represent specific standards the students were able to see what was coming and in turn understand why they were learning a specific topic in any given class at any given time. This perceived non-traditional view on education enables students to develop a new ideal of academic success. This is important because it begins to define a traditional system in a new and innovative way which seems more

attainable to the students who have not had success in the traditional school environment. This new way of thinking about their learning enables the students to feel that academic success is attainable to them and not only for others. For instance, Miss Mayra noted that “I can be a good student when I try my hardest in school.” This is essential since, just one year prior to the interview, Mayra was convinced she would not make it to year two at PAC never mind change her view on her own success in school.

The girls in my advisory gained a new way of thinking about their education and gained the tools, skills, and strategies it takes to be successful in a traditional school setting. During our time together, the girls began to define success in a new way- voice and advocacy as well as accountability.

## **Voice**

One of the ways we worked to create a culture of success was to build tools to strengthen the girls’ voice and increase advocacy. One of my goals for the advisory program was to empower my young girls through thoughtful dialogue and in turn enable them to be more successful in school. During our meetings, the girls and I would always sit in a circle. We would begin greeting each other and sharing anything that was on our mind. This was the beginning of giving each of them a voice within our small community. By beginning our day this way, we created a common ground where sharing was accepted, it was the norm. This thoughtful environment led to student empowerment.

For example, when Mayra joined our advisory she was going through a lot of personal anguish. She was a cutter. She was in and out of the local children's mental health hospital. Her world was shaped by her fear. First, it is essential to understand that Mayra started her first year at PAC in a different advisory. During her first year, she had a lot of negative encounters with her advisor, others in her advisory, and the director of PAC. Mayra was labeled among already labeled students. After April vacation, I approached her advisor and asked if he wanted me to "take her" for a few weeks. That few weeks turned into the rest of the school year. Mayra took time to warm to the group and understand our advisory culture. She was withdrawn and reserved, observing and noting the group dynamics. Mayra was not open to sharing but chose to listen. I enjoyed having her in the group and she benefited from our advisory. She attended school on a more consistent basis and felt more comfortable in the advisory group.

During her second year at PAC, Mayra was again assigned to my advisory. By this point, she had created a bond with me and the other girls in the group. She was ready to set the norm for the new students. On the first day of advisory, during her second school year, Mayra asked to make an announcement. She began by retelling her experiences with our group during the last two months of school. She told her story of how she was in need and how our group "helped her every day" (Advisory September, 2010). As a group, we listened to her, talked with her, and truly cared about her. She expressed how we "empowered" her to be who she was and helped her when she needed it the most.

When Mayra was placed in the children's mental health hospital in June at the end of last year, she would call our group during advisory. All of the girls would talk with her on the phone, make her cards, and write her letters. They all told her how much we cared about her, and how much we missed her. This seemed to help Mayra get better at a faster rate. Her hospital stay in June was much shorter than her other visits. In June 2010, while visiting Mayra in the hospital, she talked about how much the girls helped her feel better about herself. She talked about how she "never really had friends like them" and appreciated "how nice they were to her" (June, 2010). Mayra had not had that kind of connection to others, not even her family. Mayra is now on medication but she is a needy student. She brought empathy and compassion to our group as well as the knowledge of what others deal with in their lives. Her difficulties brought strength to the advisory group. She was empowered by the other girls and strived to get better and join them. The other girls in the group and I were also empowered by Mayra's strength. While this account does touch upon the community created in the advisory group it also speaks to the inner strength Mayra developed while with us. Through a dialogue of caring, Mayra felt empowered. Mayra was empowered to share her story and set the tone for the incoming school year. This is important because Mayra, along with the other girls in the advisory, began to use their voices to advocate for themselves and educate others. Mayra was able to be more successful in school because she was able to advocate for herself and speak up for what she needed by using her voice.

Jazzy also made this strong connection to her empowerment through voice. Like Mayra, Jazzy was also in another advisory group during her first year at PAC, the

same advisory group as Mayra. Unlike Mayra, she joined our group at the beginning of the new school year, her second year at PAC. Initially, Jazzy was not too sure about our group. She was used to being the quiet one in her last advisory group and described the group as loud with only a few boys who “took control.” Over time, Jazzy became one of the strongest girls academically and socially in our group. Towards the end of the school year, I invited a local artist into my advisory to do a tile project with the girls. Each girl was given a tile and asked to create a visual that described their time in our advisory group. Jazzy drew a bullhorn on the tile. During one of our one on one interviews (May 2011), I asked Jazzy about the bullhorn tile she made during this project. She said it helped her find her “voice.” When asked what she meant she hesitated for a minute and then began....

Carey: What do you mean by voice?

Jazzy: In my old school, I was really shy, and never raised my hand in class; I really never talked to anybody. I never asked a teacher for help for anything, always tried to do it myself. I was always in low group, always got nervous someone judged me and.... Phewwww....

Carey: Voila....

Jazzy: I came here and the teachers are way nicer and everything.

Carey: And then what?

Jazzy: It helped me be more confident. Uhhuh, yea, confident!”

The metaphor of the bullhorn was how Jazzy understood finding her voice in school and in turn understanding herself. This “bullhorn” was accomplished over time within a supportive environment. Jazzy, like others in the advisory group, understood what

they needed to be successful and how to ask for it. This is important because it shows how Jazzy was empowered and gained the confidence she needed to be a stronger, more engaged student which led to greater academic success.

Other students in our advisory showed their empowerment in different ways. During the spring of 2011, Lyt did not earn any credit on her English book project. She came back to our group and expressed her frustration; the teacher had “lost” her project. Bia, was in the same class, and knew that Lyt handed in her book project, especially since they had worked together on it in advisory. Bia urged Lyt to go ask the teacher what happened and look for her project among the seventy others in the classroom. Lyt was too nervous to do this. She did not want to upset the teacher and was willing to accept a zero on the project even though she knew she had handed it in. This was not good enough for Bia. Bia offered to go with her and talk to the English teacher about the project. She asked Lyt if she could help her. Lyt and Bia talked through a strategy that worked for both of them.

Once Lyt was comfortable with the possibility of a slight confrontation, I let them go confront the English teacher. The other girls waited anxiously for their return. It seemed as though only ten minutes had passed but when Lyt returned she was smiling. The English teacher had actually misplaced the project, she did hand it in. Lyt learned a valuable lesson from Bia that day. Bia empowered Lyt to question the teacher in a non-confrontational way, helped her find her misplaced project, and in turn increased her English grade. This is important for two reasons. First, it shows the power of relationships that had formed in the group strengthening the community argument I made earlier but it also is a clear representation of empowerment. By

speaking up for herself, Lyt was able to achieve a positive end result. She knew she had completed the assignment but her timid nature was going to result in her receiving a zero. Bia saw this and advocated for her friend. She empowered her and in turn empowered the group. This produced academic success.

During the April 12, 2011 interview, one hundred percent of all participants noted that they were able to express themselves better because of the all girls' advisory group. During our April 12<sup>th</sup> interview, Cara mentioned she could "express" herself more in and out of the classroom. Cara also noted that she felt "more open and comfortable." She was able to talk about the "problems" she had during the day at school with her mother as well as in the advisory group. Cara also mentioned that our advisory helped her academically because she could ask the other girls questions about her classes and they would help her. This trust that Cara felt within our advisory enabled her to be more comfortable and ask the questions she needed to ask in order to do well in class. Finding her voice helped her be successful academically.

Similarly, others within the group expressed the comfort they felt being in an all-girls advisory because of the limited social distance the girls in the advisory experienced with one another. For example, when Ruthy was asked about her experience with the advisory in the April 12<sup>th</sup> interview she spoke of the openness she felt within the group.

Carey: What are some things that you like about our all girls advisory?

Ruthy: That we can talk about anything, no matter what IT IS.

Carey: Can you give me some examples?

Ruthy: Like if we have a problem with someone we can talk about it because we are, like all the same.

Carey: Is this unique to our group?

Ruthy: Yes, we all get along, we all care about each other and want to help each other. Like with Enu. Ya know,

Carey: Anything more about this?

Ruthy: When I first saw it was all girls I was like OH NO, here comes the drama. But we get along, we are not all about the drama. We want to do better.

Ruthy expresses her closeness within the group as a way for her to negotiate school, relationships, and the world around her. She comments about how we are “all the same.” By this, I believe that Ruthy is familiarizing and identifying herself with others in the group which, in turn enabled her to find her voice in an academic setting. Once Ruthy felt comfortable within her environment, she began to use her voice which led to academic success.

Stories like this were common throughout our advisory. The level of discourse among the group grew over time. What began as casual, daily conversations became strong necessary dialogue. The girls within the group all spoke about how they grew over time to become more of a community that was able to express themselves and advocate for each other.



The empowerment, in the form of voice and advocacy, gained in advisory led the girls to participate more in their schooling, to share their stories, their voice, their struggles, and their accomplishments. They challenged the authoritarian social structure within the school, were able to recognize and name an injustice, and speak freely about what that saw as an injustice with their schooling. These three stories, though different, all focus on the same strength gained through our advisory group: the empowerment they felt and shared with each other. Along with this the increase in classroom participation also shows an increase in trust (Ellsworth 1989). This is important because once the girls began to participate and trust within the academic setting many of them experienced academics success.

### **Accountability**

I also argue that in this study the girls in my advisory group also gained accountability which in turn also led to academics success. I define accountability as a willingness to accept responsibility as well as be accountable, answerable, to others. The girls in my advisory group gained accountability to themselves, to the group, and to me, as well as to the school. Much of the accountability obtained came after the girls trusted each other and cared about each other. Traditionally, schools and “teachers expect students to care about school in a technical fashion before they care for them” (Valenzuela, 1999). It was important for the students to genuinely care about each other’s success in order for them to become accountable to each other. Brownie, with a sense of surprise in her voice talked of the group (Interview April 12, 2011).

Carey: How would you describe our group?

Brownie: We are always there for each other, we help each other out. We actually care about passing, actually.

This group dynamic surprised Brownie because up until this point she had not thought about the group in this way, as “actually” caring about passing. This was a new ideal to her since her prior academic performance was less than desirable. Brownie, like others in the group, truly cared about how the other girls did in their classes. She, along with the other nine girls, helped each other on a daily basis become stronger students. Through this accountability, they came to feel successful.

Throughout our year together, the students in my advisory were taught to think of their learning in terms of goals, both large and small. As a group, the girls and I made weekly goals as well as trimester goals. The weekly goals were “things” that we could accomplish with the specific time period, while the trimester goals were larger and generally needed more time. For instance, if a student’s trimester goal was to be a better writer then one of her weekly goals could be to write each night in their English journal to increase her stamina and fluency. The system we created enabled our weekly goals to directly connect to our larger trimester goals. The goals were created from the students four academics core classes (English, social studies, mathematics, and science) and were based on the student’s academic performance in each class as noted on their progress report and/or report cards. The girls worked with each other to create meaningful individual goals to enhance their academic performance. Once the goals were created, we would share the goals with the members of our advisory group. Each week, we would display our individual goals in our advisory space. This became

a part of our culture, our group identity. Having the goals displayed enabled the students to focus on helping each other be successful. It created accountability to each other and themselves in a more formal way. The visual representation enabled the girls to help each other stay on track and accomplish their goals.

In this study, nine out of ten, or ninety percent, of all participants noted that they felt accountable to the group, although they did not use the word “accountable.” The girls expressed their accountability to school through connections made in the advisory group. For example, Jazzy was clearly pleased with how she did “much better” the academic year spent in our advisory and attributes her academics success to our advisory group (Interview May 2011).

Jazzy: I’m doing better in my classes because...yea...I don’t know...maybe because my advisory is on me more about my classes...

Carey: The advisor or the whole group?

Jazzy: The whole group...we actually kind of do the stuff we are supposed to do this time around so...it helps.

Jazzy mentions this because her first experience with advisory was very different. Jazzy was in a group that did not create academic goals, review report cards and progress reports or talk about their academic classes. The other group was actually known for fooling around a lot. The focus we put on academics in our advisory enabled Jazzy to be more successful. She felt connected to the group and knew that they were there to push her through the difficult tasks in school. This is important because the new environment of caring actually made Jazzy more accountable to herself, the group and in turn the school. She became a scholar student her second

year in our advisory, achieved eight accelerations and went on to tenth grade, with the help of summer school, to help make up some credits from year one at PAC.

Ruthy also noted that going over report cards and making her goals helped her in her classes. “It helped me focus on what I needed to do, like my math. I was never really good at math but the goals helped make it easier for me to try.” Those goals provided Ruthy with the stepping stones she needed to do better in her classes. These goals provided Ruthy with a new way of thinking about her learning. By creating small goals, she was able to reach beyond what she thought she was capable of. Ruthy, like Jazzy, was also very successful at PAC because of her accountability to herself and the group that was created in our advisory. She completed three grades in two years enabling her to go on to tenth grade.

Similar to Ruthy, nine out of the ten girls interviewed mentioned how creating short term academic and social goals in our advisory group enabled them to focus more in class and meet their goals. This does not mean that all the girls attained their goals all of the time. It does however point to the fact that the goals became a part of their academic identity as well as a group norm. It created a focus on our academic growth but also increased our social accountability towards each other.

Coral, like many of the girls interviewed on April 12, 2011, mentioned that advisory helped her academically.

Coral: It helps a lot. (Referring to advisory group and classes)

Carey: How has it helped you academically?

Coral: In my classes? In math and English and social studies.

Carey: How?

Coral: Well helps me concentrate more on my work, and helps me focus.

Carey: How so?

Coral: What we do in the group and the girls. Cara and Enu.

Carey: Help you focus?

Coral: Yes, they make sure I do my work. They help me do better on my work.

Carey: Can you give me an example?

Coral: Ummm, like, Cara helps me study for math tests and stuff during advisory.

Coral attributed her success in math, English, and social studies to the help and support she received from the other girls in the group. Coral felt accountable to the other girls and wanted to do better in her classes because the other girls believed in her. This was a very different experience than she had at her other middle school before PAC.

Carey: How is this different than your other school?

Coral: Teachers were like, I don't care. The teacher in math, I remember, I was always trying to pass his class he would put me down and call me dumb.

No one does that here.

The accountability that Coral felt to our group helped her push through some of the negative experience she had in the past and persevere in a class that she had been less than successful in in the past. Unlike the other two students mentioned, Coral did not receive full credit for ninth grade at PAC. She did however receive credit for both science and social studies, making her high school experience a little less stressful.

Of the ten students, Brownie attributes much of her academic success to her accountability to her advisor as opposed to the advisory group. In our interview in May 2011, she makes this distinction very clear. When I asked Brownie how our advisory group helped her academically, she talked about how it was the advisor not the advisory that really helped her be successful. While this may be true, I was a part of the advisory group just as much as the others in the group and therefore Brownie, through her comments, was also expressing her accountability to the group.

Carey: How?

Brownie: Because she pushes me, makes me want to stay after school. She tells me I can do it and helps me stay out of the drama.

Carey: Can you explain more?

Brownie: I had difficulty in math class this year. Since he knows the stuff he explains things like we already know it. I asked him to slow down but he forgets. Like you told me to do, just ask.

Like Coral, Brownie mentioned how this type of interaction would not have happened in her other school, before PAC.

Brownie: Definitely not in other schools. Advisory has a lot of opportunity. Our advisor actually cares about our grades and our goals. You don't get that in other schools.

Carey: How will this help in high school or will it?

Brownie: I will be visiting all the time. Bring you my report card (*laughs*)  
Actually, I learned a lot about myself and I am glad.

Carey: Will this help you?

Brownie: Yes, definitely. It already has (*laughs*)

Brownie's second year at PAC was in my advisory group. Her experience during her second school year at PAC was much different than her first. Brownie, like Jazzy and Mayra, were in another advisory group. She was transferred to my group to help her focus more on school. Over time, Brownie came to trust me and looked to me to help her in school. She would often ask me for help with goal setting and homework as opposed to asking the other girls in the class. She acknowledged that she was more comfortable asking me for help with "school stuff." This did not change how the other girls responded to Brownie's academic goals. They still continued to push her with her weekly goals and did not distance themselves from her even though she was not reaching out for help. Indirectly, Brownie still became accountable to the group. The group would still include her in the weekly goal setting and reflection activities. This is important because it developed a new found trust among peers that Brownie had not experienced in the past. She began to make friends in our advisory group, the friendships were different than the ones she had in the past. These friends held her accountable to doing well in class.

Another way we increased our accountability to each other in the group was by creating an Acceleration Poster. All students' names and academic classes were listed on this poster. When students were promoted to the next grade after an acquisition of skills and standards in a timely manner they were noted to have accelerated in that particular class. During an academic year, the goal was for the first year students to accelerate once in each of their core classes after the second trimester while the second year students would accelerate twice, after the first and third trimester. The purpose of

this poster was to make our acceleration success a group success. There was an incentive associated with this, tenth grade. Students who were successful would go to high school in their “correct grade.”

This particular year was the first time I tried the Acceleration Poster in advisory. At first, I was unsure if the exposure would be too much for the students who were not successful and did not accelerate. This did not seem to be the case. The girls were proud of their acceleration status and actually began a competition with the other advisory groups within the school.

Our advisory group had mixed success on accelerations but the poster itself created a culture of accountability. It brought the conversation of acceleration to the forefront for the girls. By having the students track each other’s accelerations it created a more accountable community of learners and advocates.

Another interesting example of our accountability to each other manifested itself at our beginning of the year Group Building Field Trip. Every year, the students at PAC go to a local coastal park and participate in structured advisory challenges as well as unstructured social time. In September of 2010, my group, along with twelve other advisory groups, were competing against each other in the advisory Olympic activities. Activities ranged from a three legged race to a balloon toss. The group made a commitment to try even though they thought they did not have a chance to win against the other co-educational groups. Fortunately, they were wrong. This particular Fall, our advisory group actually won the advisory Olympics! This early on success as a unique group within the school, created a sense of excitement and pride.



The girls were connected from the beginning of the school year. This connection, accountability, grew over time and became a deeper and stronger connection.

**Student Success**

Both empowerment and accountability contributed to an overall successful year for our advisory group. In our group, seven of the ten girls successfully “made up a grade” in all four core academic classes (table 1). The goal at PAC is to either complete three grades in two years or two grades in one year. What this looks like is either eight accelerations for a second year student or a student completing two grades in one year, while four accelerations for a first year student. While this is not the only way to measure academic success, it is the prime measure at PAC.

Name	Year at PAC	English	Science	SS	Math	Total	Successful (*Summer school)
Brownie	2	2	2	2	2	8	Yes
Jazzy	2	1*	2	2	1*	6	Yes
Mayra	2	1	2	1	1	5	No
Enu	1	1	1	1	1	4	Yes
Bia	2	2	2	2	2	8	Yes
Coral	2	1	1	2	2	6	No
Ashee	1	0	1	1	1	3	No
Ruthy	2	2	2	2	2	8	Yes
Lyt	2	2	2	2	1*	7	Yes
Cara	2	2	2	1*	1*	6	Yes

Table 1: Student accelerations, advancement in classes

Our group had the highest number of combined accelerations when compared to all the other advisory groups at PAC. I attribute our success to the students gaining empowerment and accountability.

Becoming more empowered and accountable led the students to accept the more traditional view of academic success, increase in grades, class engagement and participation (figure 1). This study shows that once the students felt they were in an environment which fostered their growth both socially and academically the girls were able to open themselves up to a new way of thinking about their learning. The girls found their voices and began to understand themselves as learners. This new found empowerment enabled the girls to gain a better sense of control over their academics. It gave them the skills needed to ask the difficult questions and recognize and name injustice. The girls also participated more in class and achieved greater academic success rates than others at PAC.

Along with this, once the students trusted each other they also created a bond that increased their academics success. Their trust led to accountability. The girls became accountable to themselves, each other, and to me over the course of our time together. As a group, we were able to motivate each other and push one another to be the best we could be in class and outside of class. This study has also shown that the accountability gained in our advisory group led the girls to be more successful, through both the traditional and nontraditional lens, in their academic classes.



Figure 1. The Triangle: Strong culture enables students to feel empowered and accountable which yields academics success.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION:

#### CONSTRUCTING UNDERSTANDING

It has been a year and a half since I had an advisory group. During this time, I have switched roles in the educational field. I am no longer a classroom teacher or an advisor. In March of 2012, I joined a successful charter school in the northeast, CCLS, which educates students from kindergarten to eighth grade. I joined the team as the Coordinator of Middle Grades Culture and Accountability.

A large part of this role was to help establish the middle grades community and create a strong grounded middle grades culture. When I joined the school, there was an advisory program but it was not rooted in best practices. All students were assigned an advisor yet the advisor was not connected to the students. The advisors were team members, teacher and other staff, that had time within their teaching schedule but were not necessarily connected to the student outside of advisory. For example, one advisory was overseen by the school speech pathologist while another was the school nurse. The academic teachers were rarely advisors, and if they were, it was not always with the students they taught. For instance, the eighth grade English teacher was an advisor to two different sections, one group of sixth graders and one eighth grade group.

The program was disjointed at best and did not have a strong curriculum. During my first two months, I was able to convince the directors that one of the greatest ways to create a strong middle grades culture was to overhaul the current advisory program and restructure the school day.

I began to lay the groundwork of a stronger middle grades community by working with the teachers to create an authentic advisory program. In September, each teacher had an advisory group that met five days a week, as opposed to the one day a week from the past year. It was from the research I did for this dissertation that I was able to assert this dramatic change with confidence.

Over the summer of 2012, I created a spiral curriculum map that encompassed sixth through eighth grade. During our summer training session, I provided the teachers with essential and guiding questions, activities, and time for planning. As I looked at the teachers, new advisors, I saw fear in their faces.

One of the challenges I was not fully prepared to face was how to teach teachers how to be effective advisors. Many of the team members did not understand the importance of an effective advisory and thought of the addition of an advisory group as just “another prep” in their already busy academic day.

I began to think about my experiences as an advisor and everything that my data taught me about advisory. During my first few years as an advisor, it took time for me to understand the importance of advisors and determine how to be an effective advisor. I found a place within myself that was invested in advisory, in relationships,

and in understanding what the students needed socially in order to grow academically. It was now my vocation to help other educators find this within themselves.

Our first year with the new advisory program was challenging. One educator admitted, “I’m just not good at advisory.” This statement meant a lot more to me than it did to him. I dwelled on this topic. How could I transfer the findings of this dissertation and my knowledge of advisory in an authentic way? I made it my goal to make year two of advisory more successful than the first year at CCLS.

I realized it was important for me to take a step back and allow the teachers to construct their own meaning for advisory, just like I did many years ago. I provided them with the skeleton, and the tools to create a successful advisory, but I could not teach them how to care for their group. I could only support their learning. I could only encourage the organic and authentic emersion of advisory that is grounded in best practices, that was focused on the students’ academic and social growth.

### **Three Key Findings**

There are three distinct findings that can be correlated to my initial research question: what impact does participation in an all girls’ advisory program for young women living at or below the poverty line have on their academic and social success?

### **Importance of Socialization**

My data shows that if an advisory group focuses on the social growth of the student within the advisory group then the students will experience greater academic success. The all girls’ advisory group was grounded in creating a caring and

connected community. This community became stronger over time which allowed us to discuss larger social trends within the dominant ideology. Through this exploration of society and us, the girls within the groups gained a stronger sense of self. This understanding of self also enabled us to focus on specific social skills. As an advisory group, we spent a substantial amount of time on inter-gender relationships, how we treat others and why. Through these conversations, we were able to create an understanding of others and develop empathy. By placing social issues as a priority, the girls were given time to negotiate the world around them while relating it to learning environment. This growth in social skills gave the girls the tools necessary to advocate for themselves in a productive way as well as resolve conflicts in a more appropriate way. The girls within my advisory group became peer leaders throughout the school, helping others resolve conflict. It is essential for advisory programs to focus on the social growth of the students to enable greater academic success.

One unexpected result from this study was my feelings and relationship to teaching social skills. During my year with this advisory group, I realized the strength in focusing on the socialization of the students, not just the academic learning. The ten girls in my advisory group guided me in understanding the power of social growth.

Through this experience we found ourselves.

### **Importance of an Authentic Advisory**

Secondly, this study proves that an effective advisory program needs to grow organically and be authentic to the individuals within the group yet grounded in strong routines and structure with a relevant curriculum. If an advisor creates an effective

advisory program, then the students in the advisory will experience greater academic and social success. The girls and I were able to create an effective advisory group together. One of the keys to a successful advisory group was allowing the group to grow organically. Before the advisory group began, I had crafted a thoughtful advisory curriculum based on focus group data and informal observations. It was important for me to abandon the curriculum several times throughout the school year in order to address the needs of the group. For instance, my curriculum did not cover student pregnancy. It was important for us, as an advisory group, to explore this topic in order to understand the impact of the pregnancy on the students in the group as well as Enu. By allowing the students' needs to be address, the group was able to create an authentic community around what the girls felt was most important. The curriculum gave us a starting point which helped our group establish norms and routines and in turn led to trust and care, accountability and community. All of these factors were essential to the success of the advisory program.

### **Not Just All Girls**

Lastly, I argue that the findings from this study can be generalizable to other advisory groups. If an advisory group is grounded in creating a strong community, care, accountability, and a common goal then the students within the group will experience greater academic and social success. While I feel the study is not fully generalizable, there were specific factors that enabled our group to be successful. The findings can be applied to other advisory groups. For instance, by focusing the first term on community building within an advisory group, the students begin to feel comfortable. When students feel connected and comfortable, they are able to take



more academic risks. Students are also able to speak up for themselves. These lessons are universal and can be applied to other advisory groups.

Our advisory group was different. We had a very interesting, diverse, and needy group. Mayra and Enu's experiences impacted our advisory group daily. This was the first time in my advisor role this had happened to the extent that it did. The group dynamics allowed us to grow together at a greater rate when compared to other advisory groups I was a member of in the past. Because of the needs of the group and strong personalities, our advisory group was dynamic. We were able to make positive changes in all of our lives.

For instance, Jazzy, after graduating PAC returned in the fall to help in the afterschool program. Jazzy was helping other students with their mathematics. While at PAC, Jazzy was able to gain the confidence in herself. She knew she had a lot to offer other students and finally felt comfortable sharing her knowledge with others. Jazzy credits her voice to our advisory group.

Like Jazzy, I have also had to opportunity to talk to Enu. Enu is back at school, after having her baby. She enrolled in a special program at her local high school which was allowing her a more flexible schedule. Enu still talks about going to nursing school when she graduates high school. About a year ago, I visited Enu with her child. Enu mentioned how much she missed our advisory group at PAC. Enu also mentioned that I inspired her to be a better person. I inspired her? Enu, and all the other girls, inspired me.

These two encounters made it all worthwhile. Knowing that the girls were able to find out more about themselves, while being in our advisory group was satisfying and empowering.

While almost all of the girls' experienced success in high school, one did not. Mayra ran away from her group home shortly after PAC graduation. She dropped out of high school and began abusing drugs and alcohol. Mayra ended up getting pregnant at an early age. Her life has been difficult. The lesson in our advisory group did not transfer outside the school for Mayra.

I do wonder about if the advisory dynamics of the 2011-2012 cohort could ever be replicated. This study refers to one set of students at a local independent school in a mid-sized city in New England. The setting was an all-girls classroom in a co-educational school. The study was comprised of ten students. I know that for our group, students needed a caring and authentic environment grounded in accountability to increase their academic success.

### **Implication for further study**

This dissertation begins to explore the impact of an effective advisory on ten urban middle school girls in a mid-sized northeastern city. I believe that the findings of an effective advisory are universal and need to be explored in various settings with different group dynamics. Exploring the impact of accountability, voice, community and care on numerous advisory groups with different group dynamics than the study population could further the knowledge in this area.

### **And so it begins....**

Over my last two years as a coordinator at CCLS, female students have asked me to have a “special” lunch with them. During these lunches the girls and I just talk. They have sought me out to help with social situations, academic troubles, and teacher relations. These “special” lunches have enabled me to keep a relationship with the students on a different level, not as their “coordinator” but more as an adult they trust. These lunches are special to both the students and me.

During the fall of 2013 while doing my daily rounds I happened upon a classroom with five girls eating lunch with a teacher. I stopped right outside the door and listened for a little while. The group was just talking, laughing, and connecting. This was clearly not an academic meeting or make up work session. Later that day, I found the teacher they had lunch with and asked him about the lunch with five girls. “Oh, at least once a week I have a group of girls ask if they can eat lunch in my room with me” the teacher replied. I then further probed asking what they talked about during their lunches. “They just talk to each other about all sorts of things, they ask each other questions about classwork, or sometimes just hang out.” This reminded me of how my “girl talks” began many years ago. This small discovery furthered my belief that middle grade urban girls need a space to be themselves free of boys in a co-educational setting.

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