

Adolescent Literature Book Clubs:

A Forum for Cultivation of Peer Relationships with Urban Adolescent Females

Huddled in a small circle in the cramped guidance counselor's office on the fourth floor of a high-rise building, five Latina and African American teenage girls gather together to discuss *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson. The main character Melinda has been shunned by her peers and treated especially cruelly by her female friends, all because she ruined the biggest party of the summer by calling the police. What her peers do not know is that she made the phone call because she was raped. The girls discuss Melinda and connect to her; they understand that school is often put on the back burner because of struggles adolescents have with their peers:

Fay: She's slacking.

Joy: She's distracted!

Tia: I think she's a little stressed.

Betsy: She's worried about everything that's going on besides school. It's her friends!

Joy: When you're distracted, you can't concentrate on school 'cause you're always thinking about other things, especially when it comes down to friend issues.

Betsy: That happened to me last year. I had so many problems that was going on with people and I didn't care about school so my grades were really slacking. You think her grades were slacking? Oh God. I had to do extra credit. I had to stay after

school just to get my grades up. Thank God this year is a whole new year.

This brief conversation demonstrates how adolescents' emotional, social, and academic development are all affected by their relationships with others. Specifically, friendships and intimate relationships are more central and complex as teenagers enter middle and high school. Despite the centrality of peer relationships to teenagers' emotions and behaviors, our school curricula often ignore how pivotal it is for teenagers to work through these issues. Research (and even just the discussion above) tells us that students' academic achievement is directly impacted by their social and emotional well-being (Elias, 2006; Graczyk et al., 2000; LeDoux, 2000), yet with the pressures to cover mandated curriculum and standardized testing, oftentimes teachers, librarians, administrators, and school support staff lose sight of peer significance.

One way in which we can compensate for this deficit is to create social spaces outside of the classroom where students can collaboratively explore their peer relationships within a safe environment. Book clubs serve as a unique interactive forum in that students not only use each other for insights, but can also utilize the characters and their experiences with peers as examples (or non-examples) of how to understand and improve their social worlds. In my previous research (Polleck, 2010), I discussed how book clubs can be "transformational" (p. 50) when adolescent females use book clubs to improve in their reading and identity development as well as personal and social growth. The purpose of this article is to delve into the

complexities of social growth, since analysis of one year of data revealed that the most frequently occurring discussion was, in fact, around peer relationships (as opposed to literary analysis, family relationships, and identity issues). Thus, it is my goal to more richly reveal and unpack the kinds of conversations the girls had with each other regarding their peers, while simultaneously demonstrating the overall benefits these conversations had on the girls and their understanding and development of social growth.

Entering into the World of Adolescent Girls and Their Peer Relationships

The participants in this study were urban Latina and African American adolescent girls, a population that historically has been neglected or ignored when looking at research in adolescent development (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999; Way, 1996). Basow and Rubin (1999) explain, “Research has not sufficiently accounted for the diversity of experiences encountered by girls of varying racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 25). Therefore, another paramount purpose of this article is to expand the discourse of diverse adolescent females, so that their voices are included in the larger body of literature on female adolescent development.

Across many adolescent studies, we know that these years can be about the establishment of autonomy, as teenagers are often consumed by what is expected of them as they approach adulthood (Basow & Rubin, 1999). These expectations can be especially difficult for girls who receive contradictory messages from their families and communities. Experiencing hormonal changes, girls begin to realize the notion of what is “female” by dominant cultures and mainstream media (Brown, 2003). While perhaps being told “they can be anything,” they are also exposed to standards of what is beautiful by adults, peers, and pop culture (Brown, 2003). How girls respond to these messages, whether through silence, resistance, or conformity, differs based on their communities and their race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic class.

During this time period, young girls also become more concerned about the quality of their friendships and intimate relationships (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In fact, adolescent female identities are profoundly affected by friendships and peer relationships (Brown,

2003). Research shows that positive friendships enhance cognitive, social, moral, and psychological development (Brown et al., 1999; Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1990). Having healthy relationships also helps adolescents improve their cooperativeness, altruism, self-esteem, and perspective-taking (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). On the other hand, adolescents who have difficulties maintaining relationships are more likely to be unemployed and exhibit poor mental health (Doll, 1996), thus demonstrating the significance of continued research on peer relationships and adolescence.

During preadolescence, same-sex friends are at their peak, yet as youth reach adolescence, the number of these relationships begins to plateau as intimacy with romantic partners begins to increase (Larson and Richards, 1991). Research on female friendships with their same-sex peers, however, is flush with contradictions. While studies have shown that girls depend on close, intimate friendships to help them through life issues, we also see studies that reveal the harsh conflicts that adolescent girls experience (Brown, 2003). Perhaps because of their own recognition of and experience with sexism, racism, or classism, girls take out their frustrations and anger on each other (Brown, 2003).

While dealing with their own struggles with same-sex peers, girls also work toward being successful with intimacy and romance. This poses difficulty for many girls as they begin to understand their desires, particularly in a society that primarily advocates for and promotes heterosexuality. Girls who pursue same-sex intimate relationships are often shunned, while those who pursue opposite-sex intimate relationships are conflicted between a desire for being loved and a desire for voice, power, and legitimacy (Brown, 2003). This article will explore these contradictions that research suggests greatly impact girls’ social and emotional development; the unique space of a book club offers a way for girls to make connections to the texts and each other as they begin to unravel their own struggles with peer relationships.

Using Book Clubs to Enhance Adolescent Peer Relationships

Studies from many disciplines give insight about the power of texts and talk to influence adolescents’ social

and emotional development. In the field of bibliotherapy, where educators, librarians, and therapists use literature to assist adolescents, studies suggest that young adult and contemporary texts help students nurture emotional and social development (Herbert & Kent, 2000; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986), improve social skills (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001), enhance self-concepts (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), and promote emotional intelligence (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/2003).

When looking at the social benefits of book clubs with adolescents, Daniels (2002) found they expanded students' discourse opportunities and development, enhanced their awareness of multiculturalism and diversity, and promoted

multiple perspectives on critical social issues. Raphael, Florio-Ruane, and George (2001) used book clubs to help prepare youth who live in diverse environments, while Hill and VanHorn (1995) used literature with incarcerated youth to increase emotional development. Appleman (2006) utilized book clubs to promote literacy development and increased interactions between urban and suburban teenagers, while Smith (2000) found book clubs enhanced middle school females' sense of agency. Similarly, Broughton (2002) discovered that book clubs increased Latinas' understanding of the self.

Despite this large body of literature, however, little research exists on how book clubs can be used to increase students' ability to reflect on and participate in peer relationships. Knowing the profound and significant power these relationships have on students' emotional and social development and academic achievement, it is thus imperative that we expand our focus in this terrain of adolescent literacy.

The Book Club Process: Getting Started

I began my work with book clubs almost 15 years ago, behind the tutelage and expertise of Joan Kaywell, who was my advisor during my Master's program in English Education. Previously, I had worked for two

years as an outreach counselor for homeless youth, and at the time of my collaborations with Dr. Kaywell, I was teaching English and reading in a dropout prevention program. Dr. Kaywell and I co-facilitated small book clubs alongside two social workers in a center for adolescent girls.

The success of these book clubs, while not documented formally, was due, I believe, to three critical components that I have since applied to my current research study. The first was the use of *young adult literature*, as the characters in this genre reflect the lives and experiences of teenage girls. Second, we used the framework of *reader response theory*. Coined by Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1995), reader response theory is grounded in "transaction," where the reader and the text "converse together in a particular situation to make meaning" (Wilhelm, 2007, p. 27). The integral piece of reader response theory that makes book club most effective, however, is the "connective dimension," where adolescents directly connect the literature to their lives, learning from their experiences, behaviors, and interactions with others (Wilhelm, p. 68). The third component is the *social nature* of book club, where adolescents' solitary meaning-making experiences are transformed based on dialogue with others. Thus, their understanding of the text, the self, and each other is profoundly affected by the actual social nature and context of the book club itself.

Ten years after my work with Dr. Kaywell, I decided to formally document the conversations and experiences of other adolescent female book clubs. Data collection took place at an urban high school in the Northeast, where I served as the literacy coach. At the beginning of the school year, I recruited students by visiting all of the English classrooms, explaining the purpose of book clubs and my research. I gave students a form to complete where they checked if they were interested or not interested. If they were, I invited them to informational meetings, held before and after school, where I explained in detail what we would be doing in book club. During these meetings, students explained in writing what they wanted out of book club, including (1) the types of books they wanted to read, (2) the topics they wanted to address, (3) the times they could meet, and (4) the students they wanted to work with. Based on this feedback, I created three book clubs: one of seven 11th-grade girls, one of five 9th- and 10th-grade girls, and one co-ed

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group of seven 10th- and 11th-grade students. Because this study focuses on females, I only used data from the first two groups for the purpose of this article.

Once the groups were formed, I made arrangements for the location of the book clubs and petitioned for funding of texts through local community organizations and the school administration. Before we visited the library to make our book selections, however, we met as a group in a private room at the school, sitting in a circle so everyone could see one another. During that first meeting with the younger girls, we made introductions, describing our hobbies and reading interests. I posed a series of scenarios to counteract possible problems: “What if I don’t like the book? What if I get upset as I read? What if someone in the group gets angry or sad? What if someone in the group makes me angry or says something that offends me?” The girls discussed these possibilities, negotiating what they would do if any of them occurred, allowing for the solving of problems before they happened. The girls also established group norms: “Treat each other with respect. Wait until other people have finished talking. Don’t offend anyone. Make sure everyone communicates. Don’t be afraid to express your feelings. We all want you here, so come to group.”

With the older group, this first meeting was quite different. Introductions were not needed because the girls knew each other well, since they had attended the school together for two years. When I asked them if they wanted to set group norms or discuss scenarios, one girl responded, “We all know how to act,” and the rest of the girls agreed, saying they were friends who knew how to communicate with one another.

Next, we visited the school library together to find novels that intrigued our group members. All the texts they selected were multicultural young adult literature, as they seemed to best match the students’ literacy levels, diverse backgrounds, and interests. (See the Appendix for a complete list of the books read.) Once books were chosen, locations designated, and times set, the groups met regularly once a week for 45 minutes. The group of 11th-grade girls met during lunch, while the younger group met after school. The girls themselves started and directed each book club session. They came prepared by either writing notes in their books or using sticky notes for questions they had. If someone had not done the reading (which was rare—primarily the girls ended up reading more

than was negotiated the week before), someone in the group would summarize the main details to bring her up to speed.

In facilitating these groups, my most important task was to provide a safe atmosphere with a consistent structure. In short, I had to “get out of the way” and listen. The only time I initiated conversation was to ensure the girls did not talk over one another or to elicit responses from those who were not talking. While the girls led the discussions, a lull in the conversation would prompt me to ask questions such as, “Can you say more on that? What do you mean by that? How does this scenario relate to your own life?”

These questions were quite different from the formalized line of questioning that I used as a reading teacher. In fact, I had to relinquish my role as educator and become more mentor and facilitator. Without assessments or required curricula, I could let go of the hierarchy of my position and establish a more nonauthoritative rapport by listening to the girls and responding in nonjudgmental ways. Simultaneously, however, I did have to be aware of the power differentials that existed, as I am both a White woman and an employee at the school. Therefore, I had to recognize and affirm their linguistic diversity and validate the girls culturally.

Taylor (1996) insists that adults who work with adolescents of color not only support their development and celebrate their voices, but also “be knowledgeable and respectful of [their] cultural context” (p. 128). Delpit (1995) also explains that when crossing cultural lines, mentors need to listen and open their eyes, ears, hearts, and minds and be willing to put beliefs on hold “to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment” (p. 46). While I certainly agree with Delpit that we must listen, I could not stop “being myself.” While I did not offer my opinions and stories freely, when the girls asked me questions, I shared my literary responses and personal connections. In fact, through being myself—in all my multiple identities as a White

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woman, teacher, coach, facilitator, and mentor—my interactions with the girls became stronger.

Meeting the Girls of Book Club

Younger Book Group

The first members to volunteer were Tia, an African American 14-year-old 9th-grader, and Joy, a Latina 14-year-old 9th-grader. Both girls had classes together and considered each other friends. Joy described herself as quiet and a good student, explaining, “I’m not the best but I do my work.” She enjoys drawing and is an avid reader, particularly of fantasy. Tia is gregarious, the most talkative of the girls in this group. She is a strong reader and student, making all As and Bs.

Recruited by Tia, Fay, a 14-year-old African American 9th-grader, explained that she and Tia had many “things in common,” but were not really “close friends.” Like Tia and Joy, Fay loves to read and draw, and she makes high grades in her classes. Sofia, a 14-year-old Latina 9th-grader who joined book club after Fay, was also recruited by Tia. She loves music and reading and volunteers at a hospital, as she has ambitions of being a surgeon. Betsy, the only 10th-grader in the group, is 15 years old and African American. She described herself as quiet and the “loner of the school.” Being a year older than the others, she did not know any of the girls in the group. Betsy’s hobbies are poetry, computers, and double dutch. She told me that she struggles in her classes, because her attendance is low, explaining she often stays home to take care of her father who is diabetic. All girls identified themselves as heterosexual. Table 1 provides an overview of the girls in the younger book group.

Older Book Group

Like the younger group, this book club started with two girls, 11th-graders Gina (Dominican) and Julie (African American/Puerto Rican), both friends and readers. Out of all the girls, 16-year-old Gina is the talker, explaining, “I’m always loud. I’m always in the way. I’m always like to myself, ‘Shut up, Gina!’” Gina’s favorite hobby is reading, and she has aspirations of going to law school. Like Gina, 16-year-old Julie described herself as a voracious reader. Her hobbies include writing, reading, and hanging out with her friends. She told me she has always done well in school, making all As and Bs.

African American and 16, Keisha was next to join book club. Her favorite hobby is drawing, and she wants to become a fashion designer. Eileen, Puerto Rican and 17, started attending with Keisha. In addition to being a singer and dancer, Eileen works as a sex educator. Latina and 16 years old, Pat is similar to Eileen in that she is soft-spoken. She enjoys reading and says she makes mostly Bs in her classes. Pat’s best friend is 16-year-old Latina Yoana, who she convinced to join book club. Yoana defined herself as the “bad girl” and the “comedian” of the group. The last to join was 17-year-old Carla (Dominican), who likes to listen to music and read. She moved to the United States when she was eight, because she said her father thought she would get a better education overseas. All of the girls defined themselves as either friends or “associates.” They all identified themselves as heterosexual, except for one who said she was “open to possibilities.” Table 2 provides an overview of the girls in the older book group.

Table 1. Younger group participant descriptions

Name	Age—Grade	Race/Ethnicity	Personality Traits ¹
Tia	Age 14—Grade 9	African American	The talker, reader, boy crazy
Joy	Age 14—Grade 9	Columbian/Peruvian	Quiet artist, day dreamer, reader
Fay	Age 14—Grade 9	Trinidadian	Quiet, fun, reader, artist, singer
Sofia	Age 14—Grade 9	Ecuadorian/Cuban	Fun, perpetual dieter, reader
Betsy	Age 15—Grade 10	African American	Loner, poet, outspoken

Research Methodology

For one entire school year, I collected data from my observational log of the book club, pre- and post-interviews, book club transcriptions, and written anonymous surveys. I conducted pre-interviews with all 12 girls before the book club meetings began to obtain background information; I also completed interviews at the end of the school year to document the girls' attitudes toward book club and their potential social growth. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, as were the book club discussions, for a total of 22 meetings with the younger group and 24 with the older group. I also gave the girls exit surveys to be filled out anonymously, in order to triangulate the data during analysis.

I analyzed the data both during and after data collection. Using qualitative methods, I read through the transcripts several times. On the first read, I inductively identified initial codes, which included family and peer relationships, identity issues, and reading strategies. For the purposes of this article, I then re-read the transcripts and double-coded the initial bin of peer relationships, looking for nuances and patterns in the data. On the third read, I revised and finalized my major themes for peer relationships.

The following four sections of this article will present these findings. The first two categories offer detailed descriptions of how the girls discussed their relationships with boys, specifically (a) how they grapple with understanding boys' behaviors and (b) the complexities of heterosexual romance and dat-

ing. The next two sections provide an overview of how the girls' relationships with same-sex peers have evolved, followed by the final thematic trend, which explores mean girls and bullying. The purpose of this analysis is to better understand how peer relationships are perceived and enacted by adolescent girls, while simultaneously revealing the processes of book club in order to make this happen.

Trapped in a Parking Lot: Understanding the Behavior of Boys

Conversations about male relationships were common for the girls in book club for two primary reasons: one, most of the books dealt with romantic, heterosexual relationships; and two, most of the girls were currently struggling with their own understanding of boys. Using literature and negotiated conversation, the girls created their own set of value systems when selecting partners, while simultaneously seeking to understand boys' behaviors. Oftentimes these discussions yielded insightful information about the perceptions and stereotypes the girls shared about boys in the texts and in their own lives.

Many of their discussions focused on the girls' perceived dichotomy of the boys in their own social world: the "good" versus the "bad" boy. They continually used the male characters to define and represent these two categories, and then later worked to understand the boys in their own lives. The younger group was much less sophisticated than the older group in their articulation of these differences, in that they

Table 2. Older group participant descriptions

Name	Age—Grade	Race/Ethnicity	Personality Traits ¹
Gina	Age 16—Grade 11	Dominican	The talker, the reader
Julie	Age 16—Grade 11	African American/Puerto Rican	The writer, the reader
Keisha	Age 16—Grade 11	African American	Confident and silly, fashion designer
Eileen	Age 17—Grade 11	Puerto Rican	Singer and dancer
Pat	Age 16—Grade 11	Mexican	Quiet and sweet
Yoana	Age 16—Grade 11	Ecuadorian	The comedian, the "bad girl"
Carla	Age 17—Grade 11	Dominican	Fun, "family girl"

were just beginning to have relationships with the opposite sex. In fact, throughout the year, Tia was the only girl who had a boyfriend. Despite their general naiveté, they still formulated their own standards and expectations.

The girls in both book clubs read *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler (2003), which chronicles Virginia's life, especially her struggles with weight. While her family judges her for the food she eats, the boy she is dating, Froggy, does not. Froggy's behaviors impressed the younger girls, who were surprised that he liked Virginia:

Tia: I think that if she loses weight, Froggy's going to be still happy.

Joy: Yeah, cause he liked her when she was fat.

Betsy: Man, that's good. She has a guy who is so into her . . . because you know boys can really be assholes. I'm sorry. They only go for what they see.

Tia: Why do [boys] always go for the short girl with long hair?

Betsy: They all go for lumps and humps.

Sofia: Boys are like if you have big boobs, you're in.

Joy: You have to be like this [*putting up her pinky finger*] or someone won't like you.

In this conversation, we can see how the connective dimension is used both to understand the text and the girls' lived experiences (Wilhelm, 2007). The girls recognized Froggy's sincerity, while simultaneously being disappointed that boys in their reality do not necessarily reflect this character. They used Froggy's character to communicate their own experiences of superficiality, in that the boys in their lives are looking more for beauty than personality.

Another quality the girls associated with boys is infidelity, which comes up repeatedly in *The True Meaning of Cleavage* by Mariah Fredericks (2004). In this young adult novel, the main character Jess is frustrated with her best friend Sari, who has an affair with Dave, a boy who is already dating someone else. The younger girls were furious with him:

Tia: That's my wifey but you my shorty. I don't get that.

Betsy: They'll say they don't have a girl. Then when it all comes together, he does have a girl. He just plays.

Joy: Yeah, they do that to you.

Betsy: That's why I hate boys.

Like the previous conversation, the girls used the male character to understand the boys in their own lives. However, here, Dave is a more accurate representation of their own experiences with boys. "Wifeys" are the girls whom boys commit to, yet "shorties" are the girls boys use. The two oppositional roles for girls in relationships were frustrating for the younger girls, as they are looking for boys who are faithful to them and their female friends.

Another perceived male quality the girls discussed is lack of communication. This topic came up while reading *Upstate* (2006) by Kalisha Buckhanon, where Antonio and Natasha struggle with their relationship. Antonio is in jail for killing his father and has a difficult time reaching out to Natasha, who is torn between living out her life and sticking by his side. The older girls criticized his interactions with Natasha, insisting he should have been more honest with her and not reacted so harshly. Julie posed to the girls, "You know what part pissed me off? The part with the letter where he's like, fuck you." The girls all screamed in agreement, angry that he could not just reveal his true feelings of pain, loneliness, insecurity, and jealousy. They all wished that he had written a different letter to her, where he articulated his true love and asked her better questions. Gina explained, "He's in jail, right? He doesn't know what's going on, what she's doing out in the streets. He doesn't ask questions. He's just insecure . . . and won't tell her he's frustrated that he isn't able to do anything for her but just sit there and write letters."

The girls then shared stories about how boys in their own lives also react to them in this manner, failing to communicate their true feelings and causing all of them great frustrations. They complained how boys often put up different "fronts," depending on the context or the peers they are hanging around.

The critiques the girls have of boys and their behaviors—superficiality, infidelity, and lack of communication—led to many discussions of the kinds of boys the girls wanted to date. Because dating is the central topic in the classic young adult book *Forever* (1996) by Judy Blume, this was the primary conversation. Here, Katherine, the main character, takes the readers through her first relationship with Michael. Unfortunately, the relationship does not last, and the older girls are frustrated with Katherine, believing she never should have broken up with Michael because he was so good to her—a quality they discussed as rare for the boys in their own lives. At the same time, however, they debated their internal contradictions:

Keisha: The nice boys are always boring.

Carla: Or ugly.

Gina: Be nice! They don't have to be ugly!

Carla: You find a nice smart boy, he's ugly. Trust me. That's why he's nice.

Keisha: I hate nice guys!

Gina: I can't be with someone who is dumb.

Pat: I can't be with someone who is stupid . . . I used to date a nice boy but he was dumb. He didn't graduate so he was taking classes to finish, and I was encouraging him to graduate but afterwards, I was like I'm not his mother. I shouldn't have to do this.

Yoana: That's like my guy. He works, but I told him he should go to college, right? And he still doesn't get it. I did so much work to get him to go that finally I filled out his college applications for him.

Gina: My problem is that I don't care if he looks good, because to me, guys that look good are cocky and they treat you worse. I love my boyfriend. I like them sweet because I'm so soft. I'm mushy. I like the romantic stuff. I like the hugs. I can't stand when they call me a bitch or a ho . . . I just can't have bad guys.

Carla: It's not that I like bad guys. It's just that I can't stand guys that are nice. They're just so damn sweet. I don't want them to be nice. I want what I can't have.

In this and similar conversations, it became clear that the girls were equally divided in their value systems when selecting a boyfriend. For Keisha, Carla, and Yoana, "nice" boys are boring and ugly, qualities they find repulsive and unattractive. This is contrasted by Gina and Pat, who insist on dating "nice" boys. Unlike the other girls, they associated good-looking boys with cockiness and vulgarity, instead selecting boys based on intelligence and willingness to reveal a softer side.

While the girls in the older group are split about value systems for boys, they reached consensus during one meeting, when discussing the "perfect man," who the girls find while reading *Jason and Kyra* (Davidson, 2005). Dana Davidson tells the romantic story of Jason and Kyra during high school. All the girls in both groups agreed that Jason has all the qualities they search for: athletic abilities, nice disposition, intelligence, money, and popularity. Both groups, however, did not see Jason as an accurate reflection of the boys in their lives. In discussing their realities in contrast to that of the text, the younger girls provided a metaphor of the "real" boys:

Tia: Guys are like parking spaces. All the good ones are taken and the ones left over—

Joy: Are crap.

Sofia: It's like at Walmart or one of those outlet stores. You have a big parking lot and they're all packed and the ones that are empty have shopping carts on them. (Polleck, 2010, p. 63)

My sense of this analogy is that the girls are generally disappointed by the boys in their lives. For both book clubs, no one boy in their social world has all the qualities they seek, and they are not the boys who they read about in our texts. Confronted with superficiality, infidelity, and lack of communication, the girls are not finding Jason or Froggy, yet within the space of book club, they can do two valuable things: express their frustrations and begin to negotiate what qualities

they do value in boys, so as to make more informed decisions in their selections of intimate partners.

The Girls on Romance and Dating

For many of the girls, romance and dating were integral components of their lives. As seen previously, they were searching for the “perfect boy” and the “perfect relationship.” Book club often became a setting where they could sort out what they wanted, expected, and needed out of love, using the books as fodder for their own aspirations. Thus, young adult literature was used for a “social purpose,” where the characters’ motivations and behaviors were used to define their own cultural and social expectations of intimacy (Probst, 1988).

As stated previously, the younger group was more inexperienced when it came to matters of the heart, but they did often share with each other what they hoped the experience would be in the future. Tia and Betsy were the only ones who previously had boyfriends, while Joy, Fay, and Sofia said they were all forbidden to date by their parents. Because of this lack of experience, the girls used the texts and feedback from each other in order to discern ways to make future romantic relationships successful. For example, while reading *Forever* (Blume, 1996), the younger girls used Katherine as a reflection of themselves:

Sofia: You have to be ready for love.

Joy: Love could just happen. One day you’re just like “I’m in love” and everything. You can’t control that. Like love is weird.

Sofia: Yeah, you get that feeling in your stomach.

Joy: I know what that’s like—even when you just look at a person.

Tia: Butterflies.

The older girls held a similar conversation about Katherine’s readiness for a relationship:

Gina: I think he was more in love with her than she was with him, and I wouldn’t call that love because if you love someone, then you won’t go to a camp

for five weeks and just forget totally about your boyfriend and get someone else.

Carla: I don’t agree, because you could love someone and get reattached to someone else.

Julie: She was just so pure. She had never been in love before so she didn’t know. Can you love somebody but yet be attracted to somebody else? She was having a dilemma. She shoulda asked for help.

These two conversations reveal the maturity of the older group, who are trying to understand Katherine’s disconnect from her current relationship. The older girls were able to more deeply explore Katherine’s experiences, as all of them have dated before. At the time of this study, Gina and Julie were in serious relationships: Gina had been with her boyfriend for ten months and Julie for seven. The rest of the girls did not have monogamous relationships that year. Eileen had just ended a one-year relationship with her boyfriend after a serious argument. Yoana explained that she was “on and off again” with her boyfriend of three years. Pat, Keisha, and Carla had previous relationships but remained single throughout the year. Keisha explained, “I just can’t stay with someone for that long cause I get annoyed very quickly. At first you see everything that you like about the person and then all the stuff you don’t know comes to bite you in your ass and you’re like what are you doing? It’s just annoying.” Carla agreed with Keisha, saying she is a “complicated person” who tires of boys, attributing this to “low tolerance.”

Despite the older and younger girls’ differences, they all used the texts for several different purposes as they worked to understand and maintain their own relationships. These conversations usually involved the discussion of qualities the girls felt relationships needed in order to be successful. For example, while reading *Upstate* (Buckhanon, 2006), the conversation began with the older girls’ anger about Antonio’s “controlling” behavior:

Keisha: He said, “I’ll allow you to do what you want to do as long as something, something,” some bullshit like that. I’m like get out of here . . . I’ll allow it. I’m like you’ll allow it? How you going to

allow me to do something? I'm my own person. I do what I want to do.

Carla: Nobody tells me what to do.

Eileen: If you're going to have insecurity, why be with the person? Why are you wasting your time? I'd be like, "Listen, you don't trust me?" That's all you need. . . . He claims he loves her? Love comes with a big package. It comes with security.

Gina: Look, people get confused. Like, I trust you, meaning like if you call me three hours late, I'm not going to be like, "Who you been with?" I'm going to say, "Did something happen to you? You okay?" Not like "Who you with?"

This conversation reveals three qualities the girls felt were integral to maintaining a relationship: trust, equality, and security. Feeling equal in a relationship was important to them. At the same time, they recognized that often insecurity leads to diminishing trust. Even though both parties may be faithful, if one person is not confident, then the levels of trust begin to crumble.

According to the girls, these feelings of insecurity not only manifest themselves in lack of trust, but also in levels of agency. The older girls wanted to be equal while simultaneously having freedom to do what they please without feeling smothered. While reading *Jason and Kyra* (Davidson, 2005), Gina connected to Kyra, explaining that her boyfriend got "on her nerves." In divulging this information, the girls discussed how equality should be revered and overprotection diminished:

Gina: It's just this constant "Call me when you do this . . . when you do that" . . . I'm like "Do you want to know when I'm peeing? Do you wanna know when I take a breath?"

Jody: Do you talk to your boyfriend about this?

Gina: No, I feel bad. I think I'm going to hurt his feelings because at one point, I was like that too. . . . I really wanted to know everything he was doing, but now I'm like "Go out with your friends. Go, go!"

Keisha: I don't like that at all. I'll be like "I'm going to chill with my friends whatever" He's like "How you going to leave me?" I'm like "You said you didn't want to go, so what the hell you talking to me for? You got friends—all the little hoodlums you be chilling with on the block. Go head!"

Gina: This is my issue! I tell him: "Listen, I'm going to hang out with my girls." He's like "Yeah, babe, have fun. Call me when you get back. I don't want you to be talking to me when you're with your friends." So I enjoy my whole day. I have fun. I call him. "So, there was no pay phone around?" "What are you talking about? You just told me to enjoy my day and not to call you!"

Keisha: Gina has the monkey on her back!

Yoana: Guys are so stupid. They be chilling with so many girls . . . then one of your guy friends tries to call you. He be like "What are you doing? Why you let him hang around with you?" I'm like "That's my cousin. What are you talking about?"

The girls here were displaying their desire for freedom and trust, as they felt constrained by their boyfriends who exhibited overprotective behaviors, both demanding of their time and restrictive about their interactions with others.

In addition to trust and freedom, the girls also agreed that personality was a factor in creating a healthy, intimate relationship. In a conversation about *The True Meaning of Cleavage* (Fredericks, 2004), Gina talked about Dave and Thea's relationship, stating that it is important to not be with someone "just like you." The following conversation ensued:

Gina: [My boyfriend and I are] total opposites! I like to talk a lot. Everyone's like "Gina, how can you go out with someone who does not talk?" 'Cause I can't go out with someone who talks.

Yoana: You can't go out with somebody that acts exactly like you 'cause this guy—me and him think alike. We yell at each other alike . . . we're like brothers—like deep inside—'cause we think, we act, we do the same things. We just don't admit it.

Together, the girls used the characters' relationships to build a set of values and criteria for creating and sustaining relationships with boys. Furthermore, they merged examples from the novel with their own experiences to construct a framework of what constitutes a successful romance: trust, equality, security, freedom, and balance in personality. This negotiation of value systems was accomplished through critiquing the characters' behaviors, often by using their own experiences to justify or

The girls worked to untangle their own stories and weave new frameworks that may transform their current and future romantic relationships.

negate the decisions the characters made. The girls' conversations thus allowed them to define their own expectations and requirements, learning from each other different ways of negotiating relationships. As described by Chambers (1996), this "public effect" of interpreting the characters' relationships and disclosing their own stories creates a space where the girls can verbally take risks and try out a variety of experiences—those within the texts and each other's (p. 14). In this way, the girls worked to untangle their own stories and weave new frameworks that may transform their current and future romantic relationships.

Changing Relationships with Same-Sex Peers

The girls in both groups not only have complex relationships with boys, but with their same-sex peers as well. Oftentimes, the girls discussed relationships between the female characters, recognizing similarities to their own experiences, specifically how these relationships are changing and becoming more complex as they get older. Unfortunately, not all their experiences with same-sex peers were positive; in fact, most shared that in the past, they had strong, healthy relationships with girls, but as they matured, these connections had become much more complicated and difficult.

Before turning to these struggles, however, it is important to note that not all of their stories were negative, especially as the girls reminisced about the

past and how situations and characters in the books reminded them of their female bonds. This conversation occurred most frequently during the reading of *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), where the girls focused on how difficult Melinda's first year of high school was, in that she was no longer friends with the girls she connected with in middle school. This conversation led the girls to discuss their own friendships previous to high school. Tia talked about her friend Cynthia and how they have been able to maintain their friendship throughout the years. Joy also shared that she is still "best friends" with girls from the fifth grade, as is Sofia with her friends from the sixth grade. The girls did say, however, that the connection since high school has been difficult to maintain, in that many of their friends go to different schools now:

Tia: They're at [another school], so they don't have time for me anymore.

Joy: 'Cause they start talking about things, and they understand what's going on, and you're like, "What are you talking about?"

Sofia: It's funny because all my friends are all in different schools, so we all have different stories, so there's never one odd left person out so we can tell stories.

Joy: Now I don't, but in the beginning I did.

Sofia: There's a lot less to talk about.

Tia: Unless you're reminiscing about the past.

Fay: I still talk to my friends since fourth grade in my old school. I talk to my friend every night or one of them, but I always talk to all of them and sometimes we hang out on the weekend and every time we're on the phone and when we don't have nothing to talk about we talk about the past.

This conversation demonstrates how the girls used Melinda's narrative to understand their own relationships with their girlfriends. While the girls spoke about them in positive ways, they still shared with one another the changes that are occurring as they get older. Finders (1997) discussed a similar dynamic between girls and their same-sex peers, exploring how

literacies can be used to help them understand and create their social position in the world: “The girls used literacy as a powerful tool to make allegiances visible, to construct boundaries around friendship circles. Literacy was a means of self-presentation . . . the girls used literacy to control, moderate, and measure their growth into adulthood” (p. 23). The girls in the younger group actively used a written text, *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), as a tool to help them unravel their own friendships and to understand how these relationships change as they get older.

The girls in the older group shared similar stories about the importance of their female friends. Similar to the previous conversation, the older girls spoke about how Virginia, the main character in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things* (Mackler, 2003), tried to maintain her friendships from middle school. Eileen made a connection to Virginia’s experience, discussing how it was hard for her in high school, in that she had no friends and had low self-esteem. Keisha told Eileen that she, too, felt insecure in high school but shared, “Once you make that one friend, it’ll make you want to do things with them. Go have fun. That’s what brings everything back up.”

The older group also mirrored the younger group in their reminiscence of the past:

Keisha: The ones I had in middle school, we grew apart. We live in the same neighborhood, but we just grew apart, especially with girls.

Gina: Yes! You can’t just be with one person and be happy with them forever.

Carla: I’ve lost track of so many of my friends.

Julie: It’s like they change.

Keisha: It’s like *you* change. Girls change faster than boys do.

Gina: Girls, we just go through so many changes. Like me, I love make up. My best friend in elementary school, she was kind of tomboyish. When we got older, I was so girlie, and she was so not. We didn’t have nothing in common anymore.

Because girls are changing as they enter high school,

their relationships with other girls change as well. This is due not just to physical changes, but personality and interest differences, too.

Despite some of the positive experiences and desires for connections with their same-sex peers, the girls primarily focused on negative dynamics of their interactions with other girls. In fact, the older girls overwhelmingly agreed that having male friends was better. When reading *Upstate* (Buckhanon, 2006), the girls discussed how they preferred male to female friends:

Carla: You get to see things from their perspective.

As a guy, they give you a lot of advice about other guys. Girls are just too picky sometimes . . . or too sensitive. Guys don’t really care.

Keisha: I’ve been hanging with more boys since the eighth grade. I think it’s more because we’re more the same person. There’s just something weird about it. We have the same issues.

Julie: Girls can be mad grimey and stab you in the back.

Pat: That’s true. Sometimes girls can be selfish, even though they have the same interests. Guys are better, but I do hang out with Yoana 24-7, but she thinks like a guy. That’s why she’s so cool. She thinks like a guy but like a girl, too.

Because of the girls’ negative experiences with other girls and because of the stereotypical qualities of girls being weak, jealous, or backstabbing, female adolescents often align themselves with boys, a problematic construct as it demonstrates self-hatred based on gender. Brown (2003) explained, “We are led to believe that boys and men have knowledge and power and that befriending them, being chosen by them, will offer power by association” (p. 154). In this way, girls are often seen as more disposable than boys, which may be due to the idea that many girls feel they have more agency when relating with other girls. While they have more power when confronting females, this agency may be more destructive as a way toward self-preservation.

In having these conversations, the girls also tried to understand why these disconnections occurred.

They hypothesized that friendships became more strained because of the different dynamics of high school. Specifically, this phenomenon was illustrated as the girls discussed *The True Meaning of Cleavage* (Fredericks, 2004). The girls were outraged—but not surprised—that Sari neglected her best friend, Jess, for both a boy and popularity. The older girls analyzed this situation:

Keisha: On Jess’s side, it was like she was more the “I’m just going to hang out with this person because that’s my best friend.” She doesn’t stretch herself out to other people, so when Sari went off with David, she felt by herself. When you do that—just keep yourself to just one person—it makes it even worse when something happens between you and your friend. You’re lonely. You don’t want to be lonely.

Gina: When they started high school, they started to like different things, and they just started to split apart.

Keisha: High school is a very—

Julie: Mean place.

Carla: It’s a turning point.

Keisha: You really grow up in high school because it’s like certain things that you realize that you do that you don’t want to make a habit of it, so you change it and then all your friends might think you’re changing. Just being better than them. That’s not it. It’s like you just want to be a better person.

The evaluation here of Jess and Sari’s friendship demonstrates how book club provided a forum for the girls to grapple with why oftentimes female friendships are not sustainable. The text itself was pivotal, in that it mirrored the girls’ own experiences, allowing them to participate in the connective dimension of reader response theory. The conversations, however, are equally important, in that they allow the girls to share commonalities and struggles so that the fictional and lived experiences are not enacted alone.

The girls also hypothesized that changes in relationships with same-sex peers occurred because

of boys. At this stage in their development, many heterosexual girls are beginning to experiment with their boyfriends and their sexuality. The girls explained that because of this new focus, often boys are put before their girlfriends. While discussing *The True Meaning of Cleavage* (Fredericks, 2004), the girls deconstructed the relationship between Sari and Jess and their own lives:

Eileen: There’s a lesson to learn: Never put a guy before your best friend.

Julie: Yeah. He wasn’t even worth it.

Keisha: Then that’s really not your friend.

Gina: What’s the definition of putting a guy before your friend?

Keisha: It’s being obsessed with this one guy. If they are replacing the person because you don’t hang out. You’re dropping your friends for someone else. This is what my mother told me: boys come and go. Friends are forever, and it’s true.

Carla: How do you know they’re really your close friends? Like I consider them my friends, but then again you always have that in the back of your head like, “What if this person denies me?”

Yoana: There’s always one or two friends that you always put first.

Gina: What about the friend that you do trust is not going to wait? Let’s say that your best friend . . . is jealous. She’s talking behind your back about the guy you’re with. Although you still want to be close and talk on the phone and the person is always busy and, on top of that, she’s talking behind your back.

Keisha: She was never really your friend.

Gina: She did the same exact thing, you know, always on the phone with him. It’s not that she neglected me . . . it was like we could chill but they used to talk more on the phone than with me, and I was always saying I’m happy for [her] . . . I asked

her what's going on—never feeling jealousy even though I didn't have a boyfriend at the time. When the situation was turned and she and her boyfriend were not all that great and I had a boyfriend, she would start saying . . . that I'm neglecting her.

Julie: She's a hypocrite.

Gina: We spoke and I was like, "I'm sorry for neglecting you 'cause I have been on the phone with him all the time," because I can't see him every day like I see her. . . . She felt that I was not good to her because I was not calling her, but I'm like I see you every day . . . I don't see him at all. . . . We spoke it out and everything and . . . she's holding something against me. . . . I don't know what else to do.

Pat: She probably just has a bad history of being jealous.

Gina: But why would she be jealous of me?

Keisha: Because you have all the attention, and she doesn't.

Carla: A lot of people are jealous of each other. You know that saying, "Don't let boys come before your friends?" You be with your boyfriend 24-7, more than you be with your friends. So you know him more than you know her because you're with him.

In this discussion, the girls began by exploring the "lesson" of the book and then analyzed the female characters' motivations. From there, the girls unraveled their own stories and then analyzed social roles, particularly within female friendships. This dialogue then inspired personal connections, where the girls, specifically Gina, shared her personal connections to the text. The girls then offered advice to each other, thus acting as agents of change so that in the future, they can construct and sustain healthy and successful female friendships.

The Bella Mafia: Back Stabbing and Bullying

Losing touch, dealing with changes, and separating from girlfriends were common experiences for

the girls; however, sometimes these interactions with same-sex peers were cruel, harsh, and damaging. When interviewing adolescents, Way (1996) found these same narratives, where teenagers expressed extreme difficulties in trusting their same-sex peers: "Trusting one's same-sex peers may become increasingly difficult for both teenage girls and boys as they become involved in romantic relationships and begin to 'abandon' their friends for their boyfriends or girlfriends or 'steal' each other's romantic partners"

(p. 140). It is not surprising, then, that feeling betrayed became a common complaint that all the girls expressed during book club.

The book that represented this conflict most effectively is *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). Betrayed and abandoned by her best friends, Melinda becomes an outcast during her first year of high school. Being unaware of her rape, Melinda's friends ignore her and treat her maliciously. The younger girls were appalled by the friends' behavior, yet at the same time, were not surprised:

Tia: I know what it is like to be betrayed by a friend. Don't we all, right?

Fay: Don't we all! I'm just tired of that. I'm tired of people just trying to play you, and they want to come up to you and be like oh what up? . . . People try to play you and the next minute when they need you, they want to come up and be like "Can you call me?" Then when you try to help, they not there.

Sofia: I think for the hundreds of girls who are nice and sweet and kind, [there are] a million girls who are catty.

This reflection on the text and the girls' understanding of the social roles females play are what Mayher (1990) coined as "exploratory talk" (p. 241),

The girls then offered advice to each other, thus acting as agents of change so that in the future, they can construct and sustain healthy and successful female friendships.

where the girls created a social community that tried to make sense of the reading by sharing their perceptions “with others and learning further from similar situations” (p. 241). In this way, the text provided the girls with the fodder needed to understand themselves and the world. It also gave them an opportunity to reveal and reflect on their own lived experiences, as demonstrated below:

Tia: I was friends with [this girl]. She liked [my boyfriend] when we were going out. . . . Then when we broke up, [she] lied to me and told me that he call[ed] me a ho, and then gets caught in the lie 'cause he calls me while he's on the phone with her while my phone is on silent, and she's like, “I never said that to Tia. I don't know where she's getting that from.”

Fay: I don't get people sometimes. I went through that, and now Sylvia keep trying to come sit next to me and give me letters. I don't be saying nothing.

Joy, Sofia, and Betsy all later agreed with Fay and Tia, divulging their distrust of other girls and their frustration with girls' betrayal and cattiness.

Another theme that arose from the book club conversations was experiences with collective cruelty. This was demonstrated again while reading *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), when the younger girls discussed the fictional group of female bullies called the “Marthas.” According to the younger girls, the ninth grade at their school had a similar group who they called the “Bella Mafia”:

Tia: You just know not to mess with them . . . The Bella Mafia. . . . They're not ghetto but they're mean bitches. . . . They will sit there and talk about everybody in the class.

Joy: They cannot stop. They do not know what is the limit and the funny thing is that they don't have more than all of us combined.

Tia: Because one of the girls in the group is ugly! How can you call somebody else ugly? Have you looked in a mirror?

Joy: I think that if they were to ask the class who

would you vote out of this class, they would be it right away. You know why I hate people like that? 'Cause sometimes they overdo it and then they think it's really funny, but it's not. It gets really old.

Fay: It happened today. These girls get on my nerves. . . . They mess with people. They just annoy you. They know they mess with people and they still do it and laugh about it.

Betsy: They're trying to make themselves look cute . . . I have girls in my class who do the same thing. They be shouting people out for no reason and they think it's so funny. The people in my class don't want to get back at them because they scared.

Because of the representation of the “Marthas” in the novel, the girls were able to collectively identify and articulate their frustrations with the bullies at their own school.

An important event that occurred out of this conversation, however, was that the girls eventually began to discuss how to confront these problems, thus empowering themselves and each other. The younger girls talked about how the Bella Mafia specifically bullied another student, Cynthia, and how they work to protect her:

Tia: I normally curse people out for Cynthia.

Fay: When I ask what they said, she's like, “Nothing.” I'm like, “Tell me,” and she won't be telling me nothing, and then later on they say something and I look at them.

Joy: They say something, and I'm like, “Just leave her alone!” Why do they hate her?

Fay: You can't let what they say stop you.

Tia: These group of girls . . . have been talking shit about me for awhile now, but I'm not going to do anything about it. It's not that I don't stand up for myself. It's just that I sometimes let things slide until they do something really small, and then I might flip. I'm the type of person that I'm like, “Okay, they'll get what's coming to them later.”

Joy: I leave it alone, because I don't like to look for fights. But if they really start to target me, then I have to. I wouldn't do stupid things like fight. . . . Fighting doesn't do anything. You just get a black eye. And then what? Nothing.

As in the previous progression of conversation, the girls began with interpreting the text, specifically processing the emotions and frustrations of Melinda. The girls then made a series of connections with her, revealing their stories of mistreatment and verbal abuse. Finally, the girls became agents of change, in that they shared with one another ways to confront these issues, thus providing for a transformative experience. This exploratory talk allowed them to articulate their understanding of the text and their world.

Unfortunately, the verbal abuse was not where the mistreatment ended for girl bullies at their school. In fact, often their conflicts with these girls led to violence. In our same discussion of *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), Betsy revealed how she got suspended for getting into a fight with a female bully:

I was in my science class. I had all my stuff in one bag. I get in there and half of my food is gone, so I was like "Aw, hell no. You did not eat my food." She tells me after, "Betsy, I took your food". . . so I threw the food. I was like, "Take the food. Take it. Take my money." I threw my money on the floor and left it there.

Betsy told us the fight began in the hallway after class and continued outside of the school. She explained that she was so mad that she followed the girl home, shouting at her the whole time. The verbal fight eventually escalated to a physical fistfight.

Tia also shared how she almost got into a fight with another girl:

Her name is Toya and . . . I was dancing crazy . . . in the hallway. Next thing you know, somebody popped a joke and everybody . . . started laughing. . . . This girl comes up to us and is like, "If you want to talk shit, then talk shit." So we're like "What?" I'm sitting here like "Did I say something wrong?" My friends were like, "No" . . . so I go . . . into my class and I come out and I'm talking and Toya comes up to me and she's yelling at me. She's like "If you want to talk shit about me, I'll fight you right now." I was like "I don't know you" . . . That all happened for no reason.

Joy also divulged how she, too, nearly got into a fistfight in middle school:

This girl Julia she's real outspoken. . . . I didn't talk to her that much. I just stayed out of her way 'cause I don't like getting into problems . . . but if they take me to this point, then I will stand up to them. So these girls started hating this other girl, and they did so many mean things. In gym, they took a basketball. Julia threw it at her head. I was like "Julia, why did you do that?" She was like "So?" I said, "Don't do that. That's messed up."

Joy explained that Julia wanted to fight her for this after school, but Joy said "forget it" because she thought the whole situation was "stupid." Brown (2003) also found abusive physical and verbal behaviors in her work with female adolescents. She uses Freire's theories on horizontal violence and Tappan's appropriated oppression to explain that girls take out their frustrations on other girls because they do not have the power to take anger out on the oppressors:

When girls enact horizontal violence by using negative stereotypes about femininity against other girls, they do so to distance themselves and thus avoid being victimized by those stereotypes in turn. By joining those with the power to define and enforce such stereotypes, however, they also affirm them as "Reality" and ensure that these stereotypes live to control and denigrate another generation of girls. (p. 149)

This phenomenon is revealed in the texts and the girls' experiences. The powerful mechanism of betrayal combined with projective identification leads to defense mechanisms and oftentimes violence.

These dangerous behaviors and painful interactions are difficult for the girls; the book club, however, is a place where they can work out these issues, using the characters' worlds to understand their problems with female bullies and providing them with opportunities to share their stories and empower each other to overcome horizontal violence and same-sex oppression.

Implications for our Schools

Powerful, pivotal, and controversial topics discussed above, such as horizontal violence, sex, oppression, and intimacy, are more often than not ignored in classrooms across the nation. While some educators are tackling such difficult issues with their students, other teachers, librarians, and administrators search out alternative spaces where young adults can find a voice and an audience in which to release some of their problems with other peers. The findings pre-

sented here demonstrate that these conversations can and should occur within our schools. At the end of the school year, in anonymous written surveys and in individual interviews, I asked the girls to describe the experience of book clubs; almost half of the girls used the nomenclature of “family.” Tia called book club “Oprah’s group,” while Keisha said the sessions were “therapeutic.” Joy explained, “You could express yourself here.”

When communicating how the book club specifically impacted their understanding of their peers, Eileen explained, “I learned how to deal with different relationships,” while other girls like Gina said the conversations helped in understanding intimate experiences. Furthermore, while it was evident from the discussions above that the girls had tumultuous relationships with their same-sex peers, their interactions within the book club were much different. All of the girls told me they are closer now and consider each other friends:

Gina: Pat and me and Yoana got closer. Keisha, me, Eileen, and Carla have been close since forever, but those other girls—now we all hang out. It’s cool. I loved my group.

Fay: We can talk about stuff and you have people that you can relate to.

Sofia: We would see each other on Thursdays or in the hallways or say hi or like Joy, I take the train with her now . . . the books just brought us together . . . and we talked about our own experiences.

Betsy: I figured once I walked into the group, I wasn’t going to be able to relate to anybody about certain situations that I had, but I was able to. And gaining experiences was really good ’cause they’re really cool, and they all had different opinions and ideas about certain things, but most likely we all agreed on the same things. So it was a good . . . I liked working with the girls . . . I felt like I’ve known them a long time. . . . I feel closer to them now.

Through the conversations and the texts, the girls created a bond with one another that felt safe and nurturing. Brown (2003) asserts, “Those girls who remain loyal and supportive of other girls resist these

divisions in spite of the personal and social costs and, through their relationships and commitment to other girls, imagine other possibilities for success and collaboration” (p. 33). Thus, we can learn from these findings that book club is a powerful forum where girls can learn to be loyal and supportive to one another through a safe environment that uses young adult literature to understand the impact of peers on their own motivations, emotions, and behaviors.

Furthermore, when combining this research with other studies on book clubs (Appleman, 2006; Broughton, 2002; Daniels, 2002; Smith, 2000; Hill & VanHorn, 1995), we see that book clubs can be conducted in any setting—whether rural, urban, or suburban—and with a variety of populations. This forum allows us to both provide a way to increase student discussion around integral issues in their lives *and* document and understand the reading experiences and peer relationships of adolescents, thus making it possible to enhance their social-emotional and academic development. The uniqueness of book club allows students the freedom to discuss issues that are often not addressed nor valued in the classroom. Furthermore, for students who may be marginalized, shy, or withdrawn, these spaces can be crucial environments where they find their voices and receive empowerment from their peers.

One year after graduation, I spoke to Joy and Fay about the impact book club had on them. Joy explained, “It got me involved in people. It opened me up. A piece of me opened, and in that room full of screaming girls, I had to open up and that helped a lot.” Fay echoed Joy’s sentiments, reflecting:

I mean I was shy. I felt like I always had the ability to speak up in ways, but I just never did it sometimes. I think book club helped me to . . . participate. . . . I think book club helped me be a little bit more proactive about what I want to say. Even, I don’t know, like especially the way you were. You kind of made it obvious to everybody that whatever everybody had to say was important. I think that was key.

By creating a space where students’ voices are heard and honored, students can safely take risks, vicariously placing themselves into texts or trying on the characters’ experiences and behaviors, so that they can enact pivotal current or future scenarios within a nurturing environment.

The tools, however, that make this possible are those offered by the body of young adult literature

that is both relatable and accessible to adolescents. A burgeoning genre, achieving great success and popularity among diverse populations, these texts directly address such fundamental problems as peer relationships. Research supports the use of this genre in that young adult books provide a realistic perspective of adolescent experiences (Probst, 1988; Smith, 2000). Rosenblatt (1938/1995) advocates for these kinds of materials because students can create links between young adult literature and their “past experience and present level of emotional maturity” (p. 42).

Specifically, as evidenced above, young women like the ones in this study need places where they can work through their relationships with peers on their own terms. Pastor, McCormick, and Fine (1996) explain, “Girls’ and women’s groups can provide insular homeplaces where young women can begin to learn how to transform their isolated analyses and make the ‘personal political’ with profound opportunities for development” (p. 30). The young adult books within book clubs are a unique way for them to confront these issues and later apply them to their own lives, as they work through their interactions with others. When school communities provide girls with this kind of support about how to engage with others and deal with issues of oppression, the girls may be more likely to question hierarchal ideologies, speak up for themselves, and feel less traumatized by problematic relationships.

One year after graduation, Sofia spoke to this very critical phenomenon of the power behind book club and its impact on adolescence:

A lot of the kids at our school just do what they want. It’s a very rebellious age. It’s a time where you don’t wanna accept what the authorities are telling you. You don’t wanna accept what your parents are telling you. You don’t wanna accept what your teachers are telling you. You just wanna fight it all, and it’s just natural for us at that age to feel that way. And having something like this, something controlled and something that you can rely on for—weekly, you know every Thursday, book club. It lets you sort of release those feelings of oppression. You sort of feel something within yourself and within your life, and you wanna get out and do something different.

If we create the time and the space for these experiences, perhaps young women will echo Sofia’s sense of agency—thus feeling more empowered when engaging in intimate relationships and more likely to forge important and powerful connections with others.

Note

1. These personality traits are directly quoted from the girls during the individual interviews I conducted with them before the book clubs began.

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Appendix: Young Adult Literature Read during Book Clubs

Author	Book	Synopsis	Peer Issues
Anderson, Laurie Halse	<i>Speak</i>	Melinda negotiates with family and peer relationships as she deals with being date raped.	Girlfriends, cliques, girl fighting, bullying, coping, understanding boys, sex
Blume, Judy	<i>Forever</i>	Katherine experiences her first boyfriend and sexual relationship with Michael.	Sex, romantic love, understanding boys, being female, dating
Brahares, Ann	<i>Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants</i>	A group of four close female friends struggle with a variety of issues from family to boyfriends.	Being female, understanding boys
Buckhanon, Kalisha	<i>Upstate</i>	After Antonio is put in jail for killing his father, he and Natasha's relationship spins out of control.	Girlfriends, understanding boys, sex, romantic love, dating, being female
Childress, Alice	<i>Rainbow Jordan</i>	Raised in an impoverished neighborhood, Rainbow deals with issues of familial neglect.	Understanding boys, sex, girlfriends
Davidson, Dana	<i>Jason and Kyra</i>	Jason and Kyra work toward building their relationship, despite pressures from family and peers.	Sex, understanding boys, girlfriends, self-esteem, dating, romantic love
Ewing, Lynne	<i>Party Girl</i>	Kata struggles with her best friend's murder, her relationship with her mother, and gang life.	Sex, pregnancy, understanding boys, being female
Fredericks, Mariah	<i>The True Meaning of Cleavage</i>	After entering high school, Jess sees how difficult life can be, as she begins to lose her best friend.	Girlfriends, understanding boys, sex, girl fighting, being female, dating
Mackler, Carolyn	<i>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i>	Overweight and unpopular, Virginia searches for herself while negotiating issues with her parents, her brother, and a love interest.	Understanding boys, girlfriends, bullying, being female, self-esteem, being yourself
McCormick, Patricia	<i>Cut</i>	Dealing with depression caused by her family, Callie begins to cut herself so she can feel again.	Girlfriends, self-esteem, being yourself, being female
Sapphire	<i>Push</i>	Now with two children and HIV, Precious must find the strength to leave her emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive parents.	Sexual harassment, being female
Williams, Rita Garcia	<i>Like Sisters on the Homefront</i>	After getting pregnant for the second time, Gayle is sent south by her mother to get her life in order.	Sex, being female, understanding boys