

The body as curriculum: learning with adolescent girls

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We discuss a curriculum project focused on the body as a legitimate area for study and on storytelling, reflection and critical analysis as legitimate learning processes. We used feminist and activist perspectives to examine the curricular processes used in work with four adolescent girls to help them and us understand how they experienced their bodies, the themes of the body that emerged, and the curricular processes and strategies that successfully supported critique. Analysis of our data revealed two major themes: *being noticed* and *regulating their bodies*. The girls experienced beauty as a means for being noticed by boys and accepted by girls. Standards of beauty were refracted through a lens of white supremacy. All four girls expressed dissatisfaction with their bodies and described active and strategic efforts to monitor, restrict, and control them. They expressed resistance to bodily regulation through critiques of 'other' girls. The findings of this study suggest a need for inquiry-based integrated physical education and language arts curricula based on girls' questions and concerns of the body.

Some girls don't pay attention to me because I wear a scarf, and I don't like that. Sometimes I just feel like taking my scarf off. When I do, I think everyone will like me, even the boys (Khalilah, age 13; journal entry).

The body is a theme woven through the literature on adolescent girls' identity development and tangled within the well-documented crisis in girls' lives (Brown and Gilligan 1992, Pipher 1994, Barbieri 1995, Brumberg 1997). Adolescence has been established as the developmental period during which 'body image' becomes a central concern for many girls (Littrell *et al.* 1990, Rosenbaum 1993, Jaffee and Lutter 1995, Usmiani and Daniluk 1997). Adolescent girls, from Western culture, reportedly spend much time worrying about what their bodies look like to themselves and to others (Brown and Gilligan 1992, Brumberg 1997). Girls' preoccupations with the body are all too frequently interpreted by adults as annoying and foolish narcissism. Such an assessment is common among teachers and others who may daily witness girls frenetically employing combs, brushes and other paraphernalia in attempts to 'improve' their bodies.

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In much of the literature documenting girls' concerns, anxieties, and preoccupations with their bodies, including the literature on 'body image', writers have normalized girls' practices (Cash and Pruzinsky 1990, Jaffee and Luther 1995), i.e. they have unreflectively accepted reported beliefs as givens, as just 'how girls are'. This normalizing tendency has accelerated societal acceptance of girls' anxieties about their bodies, as well as the behaviours associated with those anxieties. Currently, such understandings of girls are part of the Western cultural hegemony, the taken-for-granted network of practices and beliefs characteristic of Western society.

With respect to girls' development, one consequence of the normalization process has been that it subverts efforts to help girls resist harmful attitudes and behaviours. Instead, normalizing girls' concerns with their bodies has allowed educators and others to ignore or dismiss destructive behaviours, even as these behaviours may lead to diminished life chances for girls and women. Within the academic literature, school curricula, and everyday practices with adolescents, adults have given insufficient energy to doing what Greene (in Fine 1998: 210) has advocated whenever forms of injustice prevail. That is, adults have ignored opportunities to serve as 'sites of support, comfort, scenes from which to draw strength' (p. 211). Rather than refusing what has been constructed as 'normal' adolescent development, people have all too frequently left girls to fend for themselves within schools and in the larger society.

This abandonment with respect to girls' interests, anxieties, and concerns about their bodies is especially apparent in the USA, where the body is largely ignored as an area for study in school curricula. Indeed, even in middle schools (grades 6–8), where ostensibly school curricula are designed to accommodate the developmental needs of students, little attention is paid to addressing girls' concerns with their bodies.

When the body does appear as the focus of study in school curricula, it is confined primarily to the areas of physical education and health, and presented in a manner that may exacerbate difficulties for adolescents (Tinning and Fitzclarence 1992, Kirk and Tinning 1994). For instance, rather than encouraging students to examine critically issues that influence the ways they are learning to think and feel about their bodies, health and physical educators often objectify the body, constructing it as an object to be controlled and manipulated (Pronger 1995). Furthermore, when guiding study of the body, far too many physical educators present the concept of health as a relationship between fitness and fatness—one in which health is equated with the apparent lack of fat (Tinning 1985).

To complicate matters further, the messages being sent to students about their bodies include the perspective that being fat is not only unhealthy, but it is wrong (Kirk and Colquhoun 1989). Conversely, keeping in shape is all too frequently presented within such curricula as a moral achievement. Moreover, health is generally depicted using images of the body that are unrealistic for many girls. Thus, girls have been observed exerting much time and effort trying to fit into an imagined body structurally inconsistent from their lived forms (Tinning 1985).

Finally, when including the body as a focus of school study, curriculum developers have largely ignored girls' views and experiences of their bodies.

In physical education, Kirk and MacDonald (1998: 377) claim 'The apparent neglect of individuals' needs and interests with regard to learning is evident in much curriculum research'. This tendency continues in the face of current knowledge about learning that suggests a viable starting point for study is the knowledge that learners bring with them when they enter classrooms (Ladson-Billings 1994). Instead of drawing on girls' views, educators have persisted in encouraging study of the body that features adults' perspectives. This curricular characteristic is evident in most widely distributed recommendations for knowledge development (National Association of Sports 1995, US Department of Health and Human Services 1996).

For years, feminist theorists have provided insights that should inspire educators to make the body a focal topic in school curriculum and to re-examine the ways that physical educators and others develop curricula of the body (Theberge 1991, Vertinsky 1992, hooks 1995). For example, several writers have described how the seamlessness of human experience operates to damage women's sense of self when the female body is objectified and demeaned in society. Through this theoretical work, feminists have shown that the body plays a crucial role in the reciprocal relationship between women's private and public identities (hooks 1989, 1995, Collins 1990). The social meanings publicly attached to the body can become internalized and exert powerful influences on women's private feelings of self-worth (hooks 1990, Shilling 1993). Women come to understand and experience themselves, in part, through the inequitable social and political systems of their cultures (Sparkes 1997) through which they are all too frequently constructed as 'bodies first, and people second' (Bloom and Munro 1995: 109).

Given the ways in which culture uses women's bodies to perpetuate women's oppression, we are left wondering where in girls' school experiences they are having healthy opportunities to examine their experiences of their bodies. We are also left wondering why adults continue to work from what they have come to consider important body content rather than identifying what girls find important, interesting, problematic, and so on, and starting from there. If educators hope for girls to learn to become healthy women, they need to help them question unexamined claims about the body and girls' development.

One curricular area within which critical examination and human agency are sometimes highlighted is literacy. So, for example, Greene (1995: 186) has written emphatically of the place of the language arts—of reading, writing, speaking and listening—in any curriculum aimed toward societal transformation:

We are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing, ... of the connection between narrative and the growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness.

Greene's views about language arts are consistent with a perspective on literacy described by Freire (1974) and many others who write from the perspective of social reconstructionism (Shannon 1990). Within this

tradition, literacy is understood as the ability to read and write the world, i.e. it is understood as the ability to critique the contexts in which people live in terms of equity and justice and to change those circumstances that are unjust, beginning with changing ourselves. In contemporary US society, one of the unjust circumstances confronting all girls is the way the body is controlled and manipulated through dominant cultural narratives and practices.

To be literate, in Freire's sense, one must acquire facility with language, including conventional literacy skills, as well as with a broad array of additional knowledge and skills. Such knowledge would include, for example, bodily knowledge, although this knowledge has been typically ignored or marginalized in the dominant culture. Such literacy also requires moral courage, insofar as those who act in the interests of justice are generally acting against fairly powerful groups who consciously and unconsciously support the structures and processes that encourage inequity.

Freire and others in this tradition (Adams 1975, Weiler 1988, Luke and Gore 1992, Shannon 1992, Shor 1992) have been particularly critical of school literacy education that they claim typically supports the development of complacency in students. They see students at school being taught to go along with the status quo as part of learning how to read and write. Because of their dissatisfaction with conventional schooling practices, social reconstructionists have called for the development of alternative pedagogy (Weiler 1988, Gore 1993). One notable example of such pedagogy is the work of Shor (1992), who has helped university journalism students to examine their worlds and act assertively within them.

More recently, the critical tradition in education has been extended by theorists who address intersections of gender, race, and class in curriculum, schooling and society (Collins 1990, 1998, hooks 1990, 1995, Delpit 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). These theorists have been especially articulate in their critique of inequities within existing practices, and have described alternative ways of understanding and acting in the world. Collins (1998: xiv) explains the 'critical' element in these theories:

Critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differently placed in specific, political, social, and historical contexts characterized by injustice. What makes critical theory 'critical' is its commitment to justice, for one's own group and/or for other groups.

Other theorists in the critical tradition point to the significance of story as a means of addressing issues of injustice. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995: 57) contend that stories are significant interpretive structures:

For the critical race theorist, social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations. These stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us.

We describe herein a curriculum study that grew out of our shared interests in girls' well-being. We developed the project first as collaborators and then as friends. Kim's background is physical education. She is committed to socially just pedagogy and research in physical education. Rosary's background is literacy instruction, and she is particularly interested in critical literacy. Together, we align ourselves with a perspective on curriculum as a relational/structural process. As described by Miller (1990: 2):

curriculum is created within the relational classroom experiences that individuals share with texts and with one another; at the same time, curriculum also is defined and created by the intersecting forces of existing schooling and social structures.

Thus, curriculum occurs at the intersections of personal and socio-political contexts; the personal and the structural are continually present and interrelating in its expression.

This paper is part of a larger study in which we explored girls' knowledge of their bodies. We examine herein an integrated physical education/language arts curriculum project that Kim developed with Rosary's help. This curriculum project focused on the body as a legitimate area for study and on storytelling, reflection and critical analysis as legitimate learning processes. We believed that in supporting learning and critique, it is essential to start from where girls are. We wanted to develop a curriculum of the body that would begin with girls' experiences, interests and concerns with their bodies, rather than featuring adults' perspectives exclusively. Through this work, we raise issue with the taken-for-granted assertions about the curricular needs of adolescent girls.

We explore three aspects of our work that became central for us. We discuss:

- the curricular processes Kim used as she worked with the girls to help them and us understand how they experienced their bodies in dominant culture;
- the themes of the body that emerged as the girls participated in this curriculum project; and
- the curricular processes and strategies that successfully supported critique.

We saw this work as a social change project, one in which we used activist research, insofar as we gathered knowledge 'in the midst of social change projects' (Fine 1992: 227). We address physical educators' calls for students to become critical consumers of their cultures (Tinning and Fitzclarence 1992, Kirk and Tinning 1994, Brooker and MacDonald 1999). We also responded to those literacy educators who construe literacy as societal transformation toward interests of social justice (Freire 1974, 1985). As an example of activist research, 'this work is at once disruptive, transformative, and reflective; about understanding and about action' (Fine 1992: 227).

Ways of working with girls

Selecting collaborators

In 1996, Kim worked with four adolescent girls at Dogwood Middle School, a predominantly African-American magnet school in an inner city in the southeastern USA.¹ In introducing herself and her project, she explained to students in three health and physical education classes that she wanted to learn about the experiences adolescents have of their bodies. To select participants, she asked the students from these classes to do three tasks: to write whatever came to mind on the topic 'someone who is in good shape', to write a story about a 12- or 13-year-old girl or boy who was in good shape, and, finally, to illustrate their story.

She examined the stories for detailed descriptions, comments and illustrations, to determine which students were able and willing to communicate in writing. Given the time constraints on this project it was important that the girls were able to communicate in writing. One limitation to selecting girls who have the ability to articulate in writing is that it further silences those who have not yet developed this ability. Kim selected four girls as participants: Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa and Dauntai.

Khalilah was a 13-year-old African-American/Indian Muslim in the 8th grade. She was from a middle-class family. When asked to describe herself for the purpose of this and other reports of this research, Khalilah wrote, 'I'm 5 feet 2 inches [1.58 m], brown skin, with pretty brown eyes. I wear a scarf on my head for religious purposes. I'm funny sometimes [and] like to have fun all of the time'. Nicole was a 13-year-old 8th-grade African-American from a middle-class family. She described herself as 'light-skinned, nice, intelligent, 5 feet 5 inches [1.66 m], 110 pounds [50 kg], a good entertainer'. Alysa was a 13-year-old 8th-grade Caucasian from a lower-middle-class single-parent family. She described herself in saying, 'I'm nice, funny, caring, 5 feet 2 inches [1.58 m], I wear a 5-6 in jeans... I have green eyes and brown hair'. Dauntai was a 14-year-old 8th-grade African-American from a lower-middle-class family. Dauntai described herself as 'I am short, light skin, short hair, hazel eyes. I am a nice fun person to be around. I like doing things with movement'. Because all four girls were students in the International Bound Programme, a high academic track programme, they took all their required classes together. Khalilah, Dauntai and Nicole also spent time together outside school, participating in a teen group devoted to learning a traditional form of choreographed movement called 'stepping'.

Constructing bodily knowledge

Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa, Dauntai and Kim met at Dogwood Middle School every Tuesday and Thursday for 50 minutes during 15 consecutive weeks. During the girls' health and physical education class they met in a private classroom to engage in this alternative curriculum. Khalilah missed one day because of a field trip, and Alysa arrived late on one occasion.

We sought to understand the girls' perspectives. Consequently, it was important to use pedagogical practices that would convey our interest in, and respect for, what they had to say. We worked to support the girls' voices through the questions Kim asked and the tasks she invited the girls to complete. After each small-group conversation, she listened to and transcribed the audio-record made during the session. During our weekly researcher meetings, we reviewed the conversations and planned ways to communicate respectful listening. We also strove to help the girls elaborate their experiences, critique their practices, and imagine alternative and more equitable possibilities for their lives. We agreed with Greene (1995: 23) that:

Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is—contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense. Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices.

When the girls and Kim first met as a group, Kim asked them to develop personal biographies and personal maps. Our intent was to begin with an unthreatening activity that would inspire a conversation about the girls' experiences of their lives. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) suggest that understanding individual lives is a central concern in the research process, and we thought it might also be appropriate when beginning curricular work. We had structured the personal biography task as a series of questions to which the girls could respond. Thus, each girl wrote about what she liked and disliked, what she enjoyed watching on television, what she liked to read, what she wished adults and her peers understood about her, what physical activity was her favourite, and what made her smile.

To create a personal map, Kim asked each girl to indicate the spaces in which she spent time during the day, from the moment she woke up until the moment she went to bed. Kim asked each girl to label each place on her map, indicating what she did there, how much time she spent there, and who else was there with her. To help the mapping process, she gave each girl six pieces of coloured paper, explaining that the colour of the paper should be changed each time space was changed. The girls were together when they completed their maps. Later, Kim talked individually with each girl about her map and personal biography.

One of the first group activities was a magazine exploration. As multiple forms of representation allow for different meanings to emerge (Eisner 1997, Bustle 1999), we decided to encourage the examination of images. We hoped that magazine images would help the girls reveal meanings about the body that were difficult to express through written or verbal language alone. Secondly, magazines are cultural channels through which meanings of women's bodies are construed and communicated (Berger 1972, Wolf 1990, Pipher 1994). Understanding the girls' interpretations of those images seemed important to understanding how they were constructing the meanings of their bodies.

To complete this task, Kim gave the girls a dozen or so different magazines and asked them to cut out things that were of interest to them and categorize their clippings. Most of the magazines were among those they had indicated they read, including *YM*, *Ebony*, *Teen*, *Glamour*, and *Black Hairstyles*. In addition, we included *Women's Sport and Fitness* and *Shape*, to see if they would select health-related information. When the girls finished working, Kim asked them to explain each category and why each picture was in that particular category (Oliver 1999).

Throughout her work with the girls, Kim asked them to complete a variety of free-writing responses (Barbieri 1995). The idea behind free writing is that the writer records what comes to mind as quickly as possible, without censoring words or thoughts. The focus is on getting words on paper, not spelling, grammar, being logical or making sense. The hope is to capture what the writer really thinks, to work within a space where energy is unobstructed by social politeness (Barbieri 1995). To encourage free writing, Kim typically used a first sentence as a stimulus and asked the girls to complete the thought using the body as the theme of the writing. For example, using the body as a theme, she asked the girls to develop a series of sentences that began with the words: 'Sometimes I wish...', or 'I'm afraid that...', or 'I hope...'.

The girls also wrote a series of stories and information pieces. The topics they wrote about came from the small-group conversations and the themes that were emerging in the journals. We thought the girls might have an easier time talking if they first had a few moments to reflect through writing. For example, when the girls introduced the term 'fashion out' as an important concept in their experience, Kim asked them to write about what happens to a girl who is labelled 'fashion out'. When the girls mentioned needing the 'right clothes and shoes' to be 'fashion in', she asked them to describe in writing what they meant.

In addition to completing free-writing exercises, written stories, and information pieces, Kim asked the girls to keep journals. We intended that, through journal keeping, the girls would document the times they noticed their bodies. Kim asked them to write in the journals about the times that they noticed their bodies, what they were doing when they noticed their bodies, how they were feeling, and what they were thinking. Since journal writing can serve as a form of self-reflection and self-analysis (Cooper 1991), having the girls begin documenting when they noticed their bodies seemed like a potentially empowering method.

The journals became much more than a place for self-reflection. As Kim responded in writing to the girls' journal entries, the journals became private spaces for confidential conversations between each girl and Kim. They became spaces within which each girl could express herself without condescension or disapproval from peers.

Since one aspect of this project was to help the girls imagine alternative possibilities for their lives, Kim asked the girls to imagine an alternative society. Rosary had used this technique with student groups at the university, and we thought an adaptation of it might be helpful in this work. To prepare the girls for this task, Kim combined all the major themes from both their journals and group conversations. She presented

these themes to the girls and asked them to imagine these things did not exist. For example, imagine a world, she suggested, where everyone was blind, where there were no fashion magazines, no MTV (Music Television), no perms for our hair, no masculine or feminine labels. Imagine a world where girls and boys did not care about what they looked like, they only cared about what people had to say.

The bond that grew between Kim and the girls was palpable for Kim and fuelled conversations about the ethics of the work we had undertaken. As a field researcher, she had become involved in the lives of young people from groups to which neither she nor Rosary belonged. hooks (1989: 43) maintains that such situations are essentially unequal:

Even if perceived 'authorities' writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and dominance is reinforced.

In hopes of framing these girls' experiences of their bodies in the most ethical and authentic way possible, not only do we place the girls' voices at the centre of the curriculum, but we also placed their voices at the centre of the analysis and interpretations (Collins 1990). Nevertheless, our study remains limited by our outsider and potentially oppressive status as adult, middle-class, White, able-bodied, university-based researchers examining the language of four adolescent girls, three of whom identify as people of colour.

Understanding what the girls had to say

We tried to understand what the girls were saying. We supported critical examination of the girls' experiences of their bodies, while respecting the girls' views. In an attempt at critical research, we wished 'to push on the walls of modernity with...concerns for autonomy and self-reflection' (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994: 147). We collected several artifacts for this curriculum research project. We acquired transcriptions of the 25 small-group sessions, copies of the four journals, and copies of the materials the girls produced in response to Kim's invitations during the small-group sessions. Our data included articles, stories, life maps, personal biographies, free-writing responses, and magazine collages, as well as Kim's researcher's journal.

We carefully re-read the data many times as we developed a thematic analysis of the girls' linguistic and non-linguistic representations of their experiences of their bodies (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). For each theme, we listed all relevant data from the girls and generated assertions to account for those data. Furthermore, we examined how each girl represented each theme. Through the writing process (Alvermann *et al.* 1996), we refined and limited assertions to represent the data from this study accurately and robustly. We crafted and revised our report of those assertions, selecting

examples from the artifacts to bring clarity and verisimilitude to those assertions. Finally, we examined each assertion in our report, questioning its support, and reviewed the data in searching for possible contradictions. We repeated these interpretive processes several times as we organized, elaborated and refined our account.

In spite of our attention to the amount and quality of evidence, we acknowledge that our representation of the girls' perspectives herein is both a partial and perspectival one (Lather 1991). It remains limited, insofar as it is only one of the multiple interpretations possible, given the artifacts and processes of this research project. Furthermore, among the possible multiple interpretations from our evidence, it is limited insofar as it is only one of the several that we two researchers, with our particular histories and social positions in the world, could have developed. Any more grand claim for the knowledge we report here would be 'specious, inauthentic, and misleading' (Lincoln 1996: 10).

In the section that follows, we describe two themes of the body that became salient for Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa and Dauntai as they participated in this curriculum. These were 'being noticed' and 'regulating the body'. Within each theme, we highlight the issues that the girls raised. Because the support of critique is an important intention of this curriculum project, within each theme we noted where and how the girls accepted dominant cultural narratives of the body and where and how they resisted oppressive forms of enculturation.

Themes of the body

Being noticed: experiencing the body through dominant cultural narratives

Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa and Dauntai described their desire for beauty and explained beauty as a means for being noticed by boys and accepted by other girls. Their language revealed the body as a form of collateral they hoped to exchange for being noticed and for developing and maintaining relationships with others. Khalilah's free-writing response to what she 'hopes' in terms of her body points to her desire:

I hope that I will get prettier and prettier as the years pass on. My mother says that she thinks I'm pretty. I do sometimes and sometimes I don't. I get lots of compliments from older and younger people... When mostly boys walk past me, they just glance at me and turn away, but I think if they just look at me for a minute, they will see that I'm very pretty.

Like Khalilah, Dauntai also recognized beauty as a power in attracting boys. She explained in her journal her desire to appear attractive to the 'majority of them', particularly to those boys she finds 'attractive' or 'cute'. Despite this desire, Dauntai was able to carve out for herself spaces within which she did not have to worry about attractiveness or beauty. These social spaces occurred in her home, with family, 'friends that are girls' and friends who are boys and whom Dauntai characterizes as 'brothers'.

Dauntai explained why brothers could be treated as exceptions, 'so the way I see it is that if they are my brothers they shouldn't care how I look, and I shouldn't either'.

For Dauntai, making herself attractive was something important not only to herself personally but also to her family. In her journal, she explained that she accepts and appreciates the perspective on beauty she attributes to family members: 'I could understand them wanting me to look nice if we go out somewhere in public, 'cause I would, too'. Dauntai described the press toward beauty in her life as both a personal and familial responsibility.

Although beauty had its social rewards, these young adolescents experienced lack of beauty not as a neutral but as a punitive condition. In a social sense, it was doubly punitive. First, the girls expected a lack of beauty to cause boys to turn away from the 'ugly' girl, leaving her to suffer the lack of their social attention. To make matters worse, they expected other girls to distance themselves from the 'ugly' girl, fearing that their close physical proximity to an 'ugly' girl would cause them, too, to be ignored by boys. Thus, the girl construed as 'ugly' was expected to suffer abandonment from both boys and girls. Khalilah in her journal explained and then personalized this phenomenon among girls:

Girls do that, too. Some girls don't like to hang around ugly girls because they might make the boys turn away from them. Some girls don't pay attention to me because I wear a scarf, and I don't like that.

At a time in their lives when peer associations are especially prized, lack of beauty was a particularly chilling prospect.

Although desired, beauty did not come without associated costs for these girls. Khalilah considered the conflict between her desire to be noticed for her beauty and her commitment to her familial religious values and practices:

Sometimes I just feel like taking my scarf off. When I do, I think everyone will like me, even the boys. I think I have a nice figure, but I can't show it. In my religion, the women are only allowed to show their figure to their husband. When I get around 17 or 18, I get to make my decision if I want to be a Muslim or not. I think I am still going to be one, but I'm just not going to wear my scarf. I think I have very pretty hair, and I would like to show it (Journal entry, 29-10-96).

Khalilah's words depict the dilemma that she faces as a Muslim adolescent wishing to communicate her beauty in exchange for attention, while recognizing the incongruity between these emerging desires and the beliefs and practices central to her family's religious tradition. From her perspective, she faces a difficult decision.

Nicole also experienced beauty as a double-bind. Although she recognized the need for beauty in attracting social relationships, she explained a drawback of being 'pretty' in her dialogue journal:

Well, a lot of people say they don't like me because I *think* I'm pretty. Well maybe they don't like me because I really [am] and they aren't. Well I'm tired of silly people who always say I think I'm too good . . . they never have a chance to really get to know me.

For Nicole, the images of beauty carried a price tag of jealousy. Although Nicole understood the importance of beauty in initiating and maintaining relationships, the fallout from being socially labelled as 'pretty' was that she became the envy of other girls. This envy, she suspected, caused other girls to talk about her, or dislike her. For these girls, both beauty and its lack could distance one from other girls.

Kim asked the girls to write about how they experienced their bodies in a variety of settings. Nicole's words reveal how she experienced male dominance in judgements about her beauty:

When I'm around boys I wonder what they think of me no matter if I like them or not, because I know for a fact that boys look at you. I always wonder, do I look like I'm qualified for what they are looking for?

Nicole sought a standard of appearance and acceptability that she believed boys determined. Although she did not describe the standard explicitly, she believed its attainment was acknowledged in the look or the gaze of the boy. In a very real sense, Nicole, and the other girls Kim worked with, attributed considerable power to male attention.

The girls' explanations of the seductiveness of beauty reminded us of Wolf's (1990: 3) explanation of the disempowering role that beauty plays in much of Western society:

'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.

The language of these girls clearly echoes Wolf's currency metaphor. The girls drew frequently on the construct of currency as they explained how beauty operates within their adolescent lives.

In their pursuits of being noticed, some of the girls negotiated the meanings of their bodies through the lens of white supremacy² or the view that White characteristics and patterns of life ought to be the ideal for all human life. hooks (1995: 15) contends that, in using this view, all non-White people—people of various cultures and practices—are viewed as deficient, and all too frequently as deserving of punishment of various sorts:

If black people have not learned our place as second-class citizens through educational institutions, we learn it by the daily assaults perpetuated by white offenders on our bodies and beings that we feel but rarely publicly protest or name.

For Khalilah, Nicole and Dauntai, the body was a site through which they experienced daily the repercussions of white supremacist values.

Using the white ideal, skin colour becomes a salient human characteristic. When writing about how she experienced her body around girls, Dauntai identified skin colour as a distinguishing feature in appearance, with lighter skin being considered more beautiful than darker skin. Because of her light-coloured skin she 'always wonders how girls look at me'. She worried that she would be considered 'stuck up' because of her lighter skin, as:

girls like to think or say that light-skin girls are stuck-up... think they cute, and think they too good for everybody else and things like that. But I really have no need to worry because I'm not like any of those things, and I think that that comes out of jealousy.

When Kim asked Dauntai to elaborate on her explanation, she accounted for such female jealousy in terms of male attention:

I think they are jealous of [light-skin girls] because they might think 'we' look better than them or 'you' get a lot of boys that want to talk to you... Another reason why dark skin or darker skin girls say things like this is because most boys prefer light-skin girls, and I had people tell me this, and Friday this boy who wanted to talk to me told me he had a thing for light-skin girls.

Dauntai's words revealed how girls become competitive in their quest for male attention. Furthermore, in this quest they often uncritically accepted and internalized a racist image of beauty as a standard for comparison and competition. These girls' experiences are consistent with Fordham's (1996) claim that within the African-American community it is particularly important for women to have light skin.

Resisting oppressive forms of enculturation

Even while the girls spoke eloquently of the significance of beauty in their lives, we noted occasional chords of resistance. Most often we heard those chords in the more private dialogue journal writing with Kim. Occasionally, but not often, they also resonated in the more public small-group conversations. The resistance in the girls' language was similar to the phenomenon of resistance as described by Kanpol (1994: 37):

Like counter-hegemony, resistance entails acts that counter the oppressive race, class, and gender stereotypes as well as challenges to other dominant structural value... As part of resistance, reflecting about one's own subjectivity and multiple identities within the borders of race, class, gender, parent, teacher, husband, lover, and so on is a necessary condition before action can take place to undo oppressive social relations.

We most frequently heard chords of resistance within contradictory explanations about being noticed. The girls would discuss dominant cultural narratives about being noticed for reasons such as physical attractiveness, outer appearance, thinness and paleness when they worked in the group setting. In their journals, they more frequently and elaborately described alternative ways to be noticed.

The resistance we noted varied in intensity, sometimes ringing more clearly and at others occurring in more muted tones. Dauntai's dialogue journal entry is one example of clarity in resistance. It appeared in response to two formal communications. Dauntai had written in her journal about wanting 'cute boys to notice her' for her appearance. Kim wrote in response, 'My question is, do you want "cute boys" or boys you think are "attractive" to be interested in *YOU* as a *whole person* or do you want them to only be interested in "how you look?"'. Dauntai responded in her journal:

Yes, I do want cute boys or boys that I find attractive to be interested in me as a whole person and not just how I look because my inside is just as pretty as my outside may be. Before anybody judges me by how I look they should get to know me just to see how I really am, then that's when they can judge me. I think that it's OK to be interested in a person how they look, but only before you get to know them because the most important thing is how you are on the inside and that's what people seem to forget. If you just are interested in a person for what they look like, when you get to know them you might not like the person any more and that can hurt their feelings if they really like you a lot. And another problem is that people seem to forget about people who don't look as nice as they want, and that can also hurt a person's feelings because you didn't get to know that person because you judged them by how they look.

For Dauntai, judgements about interest possessed a moral dimension, insofar as she addresses notions of how she thinks we should live together and treat each other (Beyer 1998). For Dauntai, it was important that one act with caution in one's approach to others, lest one inadvertently cause harm to another.

Dauntai was able to challenge the patriarchal narrative by constructing a counter-narrative even as she conformed at times to the dominant narrative. Although she challenged the institutionalized patriarchal narrative that suggests that women be valued exclusively or primarily for their bodies, she did so only privately through her dialogue journal with Kim. She did not use such resistant language in the more public space of small-group conversation. Her journal responses suggest that during those conversations, Dauntai listened carefully, although she seldom spoke. Dauntai's pattern for voicing resistance is not surprising. The politics of naming and resisting oppression are dangerous for adolescent girls as they struggle to integrate into more adult-like roles, simultaneously wanting to 'fit in' and remain connected with others, while also wishing to distinguish themselves from others (Brown and Gilligan 1992).

Had we limited work with the girls to small-group conversations we may have erroneously concluded that Dauntai had given up her voice to others. Kim's more robust relationship with the girls allowed us to learn that, in spite of a pattern of silencing similar to that frequently observed with other adolescent girls (Gilligan *et al.* 1990, Brown and Gilligan 1992), Dauntai retained a capacity for resistance. Nevertheless, she had taken her voice 'underground', using it only privately within written dialogue. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that, as Fine and Macpherson (1992: 178) have suggested, feminist scholarship has often overlooked 'how

well young women talk as subjects . . . how firmly young women resist—alone and sometimes together’.

Although, once found, Dauntai’s resistance to dominant cultural narratives was more articulate, Alysa’s resistance remained more subtle, buried as it was beneath layers of internalized oppression. Alysa’s journal explanation, for example, illuminates the cultural narrative that boys are attracted to, or notice, ‘skinny girls’, ‘I think I have to suck in my stomach to look better . . . I think my stomach needs to be flat because guys like skinny girls’.

In this same journal entry, Alysa resists the cultural narrative that suggests girls be noticed only if they are thin, as she writes about *when* she feels noticed:

I like having company to talk to because unless I’m talking, I’m not happy . . . I like to talk because when I talk I’m noticed and when I don’t, I’m not. When I’m talking and giving info to people, or just saying whatever, it just makes me happy. It’s hard to explain. When I’m talking people know that I want to be around them.

Alysa’s comment suggested her appreciation for alternative means for being noticed. She appeared to be struggling with at least two ways: being noticed for one’s ability to talk and give information, and being noticed for one’s appearance, particularly for one’s thinness. She described her satisfaction with the former. Alysa felt noticed when she was talking. She felt noticed for her voice, for something spoken rather than visual appearance. She felt noticed when she had opportunities to say something to others, about things she knew. For Alysa, talk may be the beginning of agency—that belief that through personal efforts people can influence their world. If so, it would be wise for educators to nurture such emergent power.

Alysa admitted that her experience is ‘hard to explain’. Thus, we characterized her resistance as nascent and perhaps more vulnerable than more elaborated forms. Such signs of resistance may be overlooked easily, appearing as they do here amid contradictory assertions, and even then in only grossly articulated forms. In this regard, our data support Grumet’s (1988) claim that other ‘quieter’ stories are more difficult to hear and more difficult to find.

We also heard chords of resistance throughout Nicole’s journal, although they are contiguous with oppressive notes. For example, in response to a free-writing exercise on what she hoped with respect to her body she wrote:

I hope that my body doesn’t change; I like my body. I hope that when I put on my bellbottom outfit on Thursday people will like it. I hope that if they don’t, I will still be happy. I hope that I can learn to just not care what people think about my body.

For Nicole, the desire to achieve the standard of beauty required for social acceptance was interlaced with the desire to withstand social rejection—to stand her ground so to speak.

This interconnectedness of oppression and resistance may reveal both a possibility and a danger. As a place of contradiction, these expressed hopes may hold potential for nurturing further resistance, particularly through

writing. If left unattended, however, this source of contradiction could lead Nicole to develop a consciousness brutalized by the dilemma of wanting to achieve incommensurable goals, i.e. she may hold herself responsible for achieving both the acceptances of dominant perspectives on beauty and their rejection—a no-win situation that could engender a sustained sense of self-disappointment.

Besides addressing the importance of being noticed, the girls also described several ways of regulating the body. In the section that follows, we discuss this theme, showing what it revealed about how the girls experienced their bodies through dominant cultural narratives and where and how they resisted those narratives.

Regulating the body

Experiencing the body through dominant cultural narratives

Dissatisfaction with the body was an experience understood by each of the four girls. Their dissatisfaction manifested itself in their active efforts to monitor, restrict and control their bodies in order to modify their appearance. Alysa admitted privately in her journal just how disappointed she felt with the image of her body, 'I get kind of depressed when I look in the mirror because I always see myself as fat'. In response, Kim wrote in Alysa's journal asking why she thinks she is fat. Alysa wrote in answer, 'I think I'm fat because of my legs'. To understand the standard that Alysa was using, it is important to mention that, at the time of this study, Alysa was 5 feet 2 inches (1.58 m), and weighed 115 pounds (52.28 kg). She wore a size 5–6 in pants. By current health standards, it would be difficult to characterize Alysa as 'fat'.

Alysa was not the only girl to worry about getting fat. Khalilah wrote in her journal:

Every time I'm about to get in the shower, I always notice my body. I usually think, maybe I need to lose some of this fat on my stomach. I think it looks nasty to have a big stomach... Also I think what will people think if they had saw my stomach. It's not really big, I'm just not satisfied with it.

Khalilah's language also depicted her body in a negative light, as an object that somehow exists apart from her and as one that she judged harshly. Her use of the adjective 'nasty' suggests a sense of revulsion with her body. Furthermore, her dissatisfaction with the stomach is particularly disturbing, insofar as the stomach has long been associated in human culture with hunger, desire and appetite—all healthy aspects of being human.

In their attempts to negotiate their dissatisfaction, Khalilah, Alysa, Nicole and Dautai actively participated in several regulation practices that included monitoring the body as if it were a separate entity from the person. Khalilah's journal entry revealed how pervasive her surveillance of her body had become:

When I'm around my friends or especially when I'm around girls I don't know, I pay close attention to my body... I make sure there are no boogers in my nose. That's one thing I can't stand. When I'm around boys I have to be perfect. I have to make sure everything is right, even my face expression.

The level of conscious attention necessary to conduct such surveillance is considerable and represents an additional cost of beauty.

Khalilah's surveillance was conducted through conscious strategic actions that she incorporated into her daily routines. She explored the effects of certain facial moves by privately trying several out in front of her mirror. Khalilah explained in her journal her efforts to decide which facial expression 'looks best'. 'When I look in the mirror I make faces to see which face looks best and I even model [clothes] to see what I look like'. Besides these private surveillance activities, Khalilah also watched her body while she was in the midst of other activities. She explained that she was particularly attentive during physical activity around others. For example, she wrote:

I make sure my shirt doesn't come up when my hands are in the air. And also I see if I can see the print of my stomach through my shirt when I put my hands in the air.

While Dauntai was concerned about how she 'looks in a certain shirt or pair of jeans or dress', she was worried about 'bigger things'. Unlike the other girls, she was more concerned about 'hygiene', reporting that she monitored several related matters including 'body odour', 'cleanliness' and 'bad breath'. Dauntai discussed in her journal her reasons for such surveillance:

I like to make sure that I am clean and don't have body odour because I want to make a good impression on people especially when I meet someone for the first time because of the saying that first impressions always stick.

In addition to controlling how her body smells, Dauntai monitored her face, particularly 'how clean my face is' and what 'bumps that may have appeared or disappeared'.

As part of regulation, these four girls did not simply monitor their bodies, they actively participated in several practices designed to control their bodies in order to conform to standards of beauty as they understood them. In these pursuits, the girls were both active and strategic. They were active insofar as they took matters into their own hands in matters of beauty. They were strategic insofar as the actions taken were intended to address a particular end, in this case the attainment of particular standards of beauty (Oliver 1999).

One standard for beauty that Khalilah, Nicole and Dauntai discussed during the magazine exploration was the need to have 'straight hair'. On several occasions, they mentioned that girls with 'wrinkly' or 'woolly' hair should, treat 'it' with a perm to keep 'it' from 'looking like a doggy'. Images of beauty based on the white ideal are used against all women as a means of creating hierarchical structures of power (Wolf 1990). Therefore, Black girls and other non-White girls may pay particularly very high cultural costs in their pursuit of beauty. They must not only strive for beauty, but

they must strive for a beauty that places them in roles as imposters in the social world—people struggling, not so much to claim who they are, but to achieve a standard developed by and for a group from which they have been socially excluded.

Both hooks (1995) and Collins (1990) agree that light skin and long straight hair remain the standards of beauty in the racist imagination. These images of beauty are powerful forms of control that influence Black girls' relationships with Whites, with Black men, and with each other (Collins 1990). hooks (1995: 186) claims that by using the term 'white supremacy', people can begin to see how Black people 'are socialized to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy', and how these values are used as one means of monitoring other Black people. These girls were using racist images to judge beauty and character in themselves as well as in other girls. The three were learning ways to control their bodies to satisfy the white supremacist images portrayed as socially beautiful.

Although Alysa did not discuss the need to have straight hair (her privilege as a White included straight hair), she practised regulating her body to feel 'skinnier' in an effort to appear more attractive for boys. She revealed through journal writing the extent of her preoccupation with her body, explaining that she 'thinks about her body (looks) all the time'. She also explained why she makes efforts to restrict her body:

Since I like wearing short shirts, I'm always thinking about sucking in my stomach . . . I think I have to suck in my stomach to look better . . . I think that my stomach needs to be flat because guys like skinny girls.

Alysa not only restricted her stomach around boys, she also did so among girls and with her dad's family:

When I'm around other girls sometimes we're just sitting around talking, I sit up real straight so my stomach looks skinnier . . . When I'm around my dad's family I try to look as skinny and as pretty as I can because they are all skinny and pretty and my step-brother is kinda cute.

Alysa's desire to appear 'as skinny and pretty' as possible led her to control her body across much of her life.

At home, Alysa developed a concealment strategy to reduce the strain of worry she felt at school about what boys might think of her. As she explained, 'When I'm around boys at school, I wonder if they think I'm fat, but when I'm around guys at home I just wear big shirts to hide my stomach'. When she was not literally constraining her body by pulling in her stomach for fear of appearing fat, she practised modification of the body through concealment. Both were efforts to minimize her body in the world.

Some of the modifications Alysa sought are inconsistent with healthy patterns of human growth and development. For example, she argued, and Khalilah agreed, that it is possible to control pubescent development through the power of will. Alysa's theory of adolescent development crystallized when Kim asked the girls, 'When you look at magazines do you ever look at them and say, "No, these people aren't right; they don't know what they're talking about?"'. Alysa responded, 'Sometimes . . . like

those ones that say that when you get this age you like do this or you turn like this or something like that. Sometimes people don't do that or whatever'.

Alysa's response opened a conversational space not only for critiquing magazine content, but also for considering adolescent development. Kim asked, 'Let's say, for example, if in one of the magazines it says as you get older your hips are going to get wider'. Alysa answered immediately, 'That's not necessarily true'. Kim asked, 'Is that one of those things that you don't believe?'. 'No', answered Nicole. Immediately Khalilah objected to Kim's comment, 'I wouldn't believe that. I don't believe that'. Kim elicited a prediction, 'What do you think will happen [during pubescent development]?'. Khalilah responded, 'Some people maybe [will develop hips] some people not'. Alysa then presented a theory of development that was somewhat surprising to Kim:

Whatever you want to happen ... If you sit there and say OK, this is what's gonna happen and then you sit there and be waiting and waiting for it to happen then it is probably going to happen. But if you say no that's not going to happen and work to make so that it doesn't happen, then it won't.

Disturbingly for us, the rejection of the hips carries with it the rejection, albeit in some unconscious form, of a physiological development that is natural and necessary for the continuance of human life.

In addition to trying to control biological development, Nicole, Alysa and Khalilah practised restricting food intake as a means of regulating their bodies. To regulate her body shape, Khalilah reduced her eating. She explained in her journal one strategy she had used and some of its effects:

So if my mother makes something for dinner I don't like, I don't eat. A couple of weeks ago I never ate until dinner. When you don't eat for a while, when you do eat you're not hungry. My mother told me I needed to start eating because I was getting tired easy and weak.

Khalilah also expressed an emotional unease with the practice of eating publicly or at least in the public space of the school: 'I don't eat in school because I don't like eating in front of people I don't really know'. These comments suggest that Khalilah was developing several restrictions on her eating practices.

Nicole and Alysa also discussed how they regulated their eating. They were beginning to see how denying oneself food was a perceived means for preventing 'getting fat'.

Nicole: My grandma always pick with me because it was like last year I wasn't this bony, and, um, my grandma told my mom, I think she got ashamed and went on a diet ... I use to go out to eat every day ... Then I just, I got tired of eatin'. I said I don't want to eat.

Kim: So you don't eat any more?

Nicole: Yes, I eat, but probably only once a day.

Khalilah: Me, too, 'til dinner.

Nicole: I don't never get hungry because I'm not used to eating any more.

Alysa: Yeah, it's like you get into that way.

Khalilah: I use to eat a lot, I could eat two plates of spaghetti.

Alysa: I think everybody eats a lot when they're kids.

Khalilah: And when I got sick, like last year or year before, then I stopped eatin' a lot.

Taken together, the three girls' explanations reveal a loss of desire for food. Nicole reported how she 'just got tired of eating', and Alysa rang in with hearty agreement. More disturbingly, their conversations foreshadow some of the elements noted in anorexia as described by Bordo (1997: 100):

Anorexia will erupt, typically, in the course of what begins as a fairly moderate diet regime... The young woman discovers what it feels like to crave and want and need, and yet, through the exercise of her own will, to triumph over that need... The experience is intoxicating, habit-forming.

Describing this type of self-mastery, Alysa explained how she deals with her hunger, 'Usually if I'm hungry, I find something else to do so I just forget about it'.

Resisting oppressive forms of enculturation

We observed resistance to bodily regulation in the form of criticism, i.e. the girls pointed out some faults of bodily regulation. Although they did not criticize their own eating habits as being detrimental to their health and development, they did critique other girls' eating behaviours. Such form of criticism occurred most often during the small-group discussions. Nicole claimed that anorexia is a means 'other girls' use to prevent developing. She explained having some 'stressed' friends who 'might be anorexic or something because they think, because their body is changing, that they're gonna get fat'. She also claimed that 'other' girls 'think if they eat then they gonna get fatter'. She admitted having heard people say they 'haven't eaten in three weeks'.

Alysa also publicly discussed other girls' habits:

I know this one girl, she, um, who didn't eat for three days. All she did was drink water and that was it in the morning and at night. That's all she did.

Although Alysa admitted that friends and neighbours were concerned about her eating patterns, she denied their concerns were warranted. 'People think, like everybody in my neighbourhood thinks like I'm anorexic, but I'm not. I eat'. She also showed considerable knowledge on the subject of eating disorders, and easily distinguished anorexia and bulimia:

Anorexia [is when] you don't eat... Bulimia is where you eat but you throw it up... It's gross 'cause you stick your finger down your throat and you start throwing up and it will get all over your hands.

Alysa's expertise was not what troubled us, but rather her explanation of the experience of the hands which suggests a personalized knowledge of

the bulimic experience. Yet, insofar as Alysa, Nicole, Dauntai and Khalilah were willing to discuss eating habits, even in terms of what other girls do, they may have been offering a form of resistance to their own emerging practices or, as their descriptions suggest, to those of other members of their peer group.

For these girls, regulating their bodies was a common practice in the quest for beauty. Their conversations were consistent with others in which women are described as:

spending more time on the management and discipline of our bodies than we have in a long, long time. In a decade marked by a reopening of the public arena to women, the intensification of such regimens appears diversionary and subverting (Bordo 1997: 91).

In considering the meanings of times when these girls were actively preparing their bodies for attractiveness, holding in the stomachs, straightening their hair, and thinking about what others, particularly males, might think of them, it is important that we, as educators, attend to what is missing from the existential picture. We might, for example, ask what the girls were not doing; what knowledge, talents, skills or other aspects of their human potential were they not developing?

Curricular processes supporting critique

Throughout this project, Kim tried to help Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa and Dauntai name and critique the meanings they were making of their bodies. Critique appeared to us to be a reasonable place to begin in a curriculum project designed to encourage and support agency or active engagement in the world. To create this space for critique, we designed a variety of activities to encourage critical reflection, both within the group setting and the dialogue journals.

Throughout this project, we examined our data to determine what conditions and strategies in our activist research process helped the girls raise questions around taken-for-granted cultural narratives and consider alternative possibilities for their lives. Through analysis, we found that five processes seemed useful:

- tapping girls' interests as a starting place for discussion;
- listening actively and respectfully to what the girls were struggling to say;
- developing strategic questions that supported elaboration or challenged their current views;
- creating safe spaces for expressing alternative views; and
- supporting imagination of alternative worlds.

It is important to note we worked with a small group of girls. Nevertheless, this small-group approach allowed us to look closely at what we were doing and how the girls responded in order to identify aspects of our approach worth adapting for a larger group. In addition, it allowed us to understand some of the complexities of how the girls experienced their bodies,

complexities that we would have missed had we worked with large numbers of girls.

Tapping girls' interests

The girls found it compelling to talk with each other about the topics Kim elicited and supported. They pointed to their appreciation for the discussion topics when Kim asked the girls to write in their journals about their experiences in this group. Khalilah explained her interest in the discussion topics:

I liked talking about all of the things we talked about. I liked this class because we got to talk about things I wouldn't have really talked about w/ [with] my friends... I did like working w/ this group. I wouldn't mind working w/ them again.

Like Khalilah, Nicole also found the topics associated with the body interesting, albeit neglected in their school curricula. She wrote: 'I feel that it was a good experience. I got to express a lot of great issues I don't get to talk about all the time'.

Although we were interested in understanding how these girls experienced their bodies, Kim often encouraged the girls to generate topics of interest to them, as she did when she asked the girls to cut out magazine pictures of interest to them. She then used these topics as a springboard for nurturing critique. What we began to realize through this process, was that tapping girls' interests was helpful in understanding their bodily knowledge.

Active, respectful listening

Like tapping girls' interests, we also found that active and respectful listening was of great importance to the girls in this curriculum work. For Kim, active listening meant repeatedly asking herself questions such as, 'What is this girl trying to say?'; 'How can I help her to explain her meaning in greater detail?'; and 'How can I help her better articulate what she means so that all five of us can more fully understand and appreciate her view?' In the small-group discussion, Kim tried to follow the girls' leads even when that meant going in a direction she would not have otherwise have gone. Within the girls' journals, she would communicate active listening by writing back to each girl, often asking her to elaborate on something she had previously written.

Active listening was only one part of the listening process that Kim attempted with the girls. We also found that encouraging the girls to talk and listening respectfully as they did so, were very important for supporting critique. Respectful listening often meant putting aside evaluation or judgement of the worthiness of the knowledge that the girls were sharing. At times, this was difficult for Kim when issues of injustice surfaced in the

girls' conversations. Nevertheless, careful listening by itself was a type of support, a way to nurture whatever the girls had to say, including their resistance. The girls themselves explained how important active listening was in the context of these conversations:

Nicole: You know, like if [you] come here on Tuesday, on Thursday you come back, and you and you, we can tell that you thought about what we said. Because, I mean, you have somethin' to say about it, and then you also go back to...

Khalilah: What we said earlier.

Nicole: When we first come in here we might talk about somethin' and then when we leave we might be talkin' about something else. But like when you come in on Thursday we can tell you were listenin' because you still remember, we can tell you thought about it.

The point in our work is that stories must not only be exchanged, they must also be valued. Alysa, Dauntai, Nicole and Khalilah seemed to value Kim's efforts to understand them as well as her willingness to listen to what they thought was important. From their analysis, we learned that they, too, were attentive to Kim. They noticed how she returned to their ideas after each session, and they judged her use of their stories to be evidence that she 'listened'.

Listening and respectfully considering the girls' contributions was a very active process requiring considerable time and energy. It involved Kim focusing on what was happening during the small-group sessions, carefully reading their journal entries, recording many of their conversations, reviewing transcripts of their conversations, and preparing outlines of the points made and issues raised.

Strategic questioning

In addition to active and respectful listening, Kim also encouraged critique and nurtured resistance to bodily oppression by asking small, bridging questions with these ends in mind. The questions she asked were not often the formal critical questions found in the literature on critical literacy, but rather small questions such as 'What do you mean by that?', 'Can you tell me why you feel that way?', and 'Imagine these [oppressive] things did not exist, what would it be like?' Occasionally, her questions challenged the validity of the information or ideas being discussed. So, for example, she asked 'Do you believe all this stuff you read in magazines?'. Brooker and MacDonald (1999: 88) claim that 'it is essential that physical educators not only take account of students' shifting understandings of... the body, but also adopt teaching approaches that heighten students' critical capacities'.

Kim used such questions to help the girls extend and analyse their language and become more aware of conditions that influence the ways they are learning to think about their bodies. Khalilah described in her journal her experience of the critical processes, 'it was kind of a challenge for me because you wanted us to explain what we had to say, and some of the

things were hard to explain'. This finding is consistent with Greene's (1988, 1995) argument that only when people can begin to see their situations as obstacles can they begin to devise plans to overcome these obstacles.

Safe spaces

The spaces that the girls used to voice their resistance were also important. We found that if we wanted to carefully consider adolescents' views, we had to create safe spaces for them to express their views. The two primary spaces Kim used were the dialogue journals and small-group discussions. Although at first the journals were intended as a space where the girls could document the times they noticed their bodies, they soon became a space in which Kim could talk privately, through writing, with each of the four girls.

The content of the girls' journal writing was different in important ways from their small-group conversations. Sometimes they took stances on issues that were different from those they had taken in the small group. Sometimes they expressed views and exchanged information in their journals when they had remained silent in the small group. Sometimes in their journals they elaborated on a point they had made or they introduced a new topic or new piece of information or perspective. Sometimes the girls used the journals to share how they personally experienced many issues raised in the group conversations, and they confided how they felt about some of the small-group conversations. It seemed that the journal had become a space they judged to be safer than the small-group sessions. In their journals, the girls seemed freer to express notions that might have seemed inappropriate or risky during our group conversations. Furthermore, the girls were always eager to see what Kim wrote in response to their entries, and frequently asked at the beginning of each week, 'Did you read my journal?' or 'Did you write anything in my journal?'

The group conversations reflected a more contentious pattern than the journal dialogues. Despite Kim's efforts to sustain a social arrangement in which every voice could be heard and every girl could speak, an unequal conversational pattern developed and persisted. Nicole dominated the conversation, and Khalilah was a close second. Dauntai listened for lengthy periods, but when she spoke all three of the other girls and Kim reflected carefully on what she said. It was as if she spoke in a different tone, one that often forced the group to reconsider an issue or line of analysis. Alysa's role in the group was more worrisome to us. Over time, Alysa became the one whose voice was most often resisted, ignored and otherwise silenced during group conversations. While she spoke during group conversations, the others frequently disagreed with her, or cut her off in the middle of speaking.

A significant difference between the two venues for response lay in the type of comments the girls were likely to make. Small-group conversation and dialogue journal writing served as complementary forms for these girls to reflect on how they experienced their bodies. Within the small-group

discussions, the girls described and named oppression, but they seldom expressed outright resistance. However, within the privacy of their journals, the girls expressed nascent forms of resistance to numerous examples of gender, race, class and religious oppression. Through writing, the girls often explored ways of resisting the very stories they told and supported in the more public conversational spaces. Seldom, however, did any girl mention the content from her journal during group conversations. This is a significant finding in our work—one that makes us excited about further developing opportunities for adolescents to use journal writing as a focal activity in efforts to nurture critical reflection.

Several of the girls wrote about why they liked using the dialogue journals. For Alysa, it was a safe place to voice her opinions: 'I like writing in our journal because if I don't want to talk about something I can write it'. For Khalilah, it was a space to say some things that were weighing on her:

Some of these things I wrote in this journal I can't believe I wrote for someone to see that I didn't really know at first. I usually don't express what I have to say around grown-ups. I don't even tell my mother how I feel. In this journal I have expressed a lot of my feelings and said what I needed to say. I'm glad I said some of these things to get them off my chest. I wish I could do this more often.

For Dauntai, it was an opportunity to confide in an adult:

I think it has been fun writing in the journals. Some of the things you said or asked me made me think twice or differently about some things. I liked writing about the different subjects, especially about the boys, because I had to tell an older person how younger people feel about boys.

The girls' use of these opportunities supports Collins' (1990: 95) view that 'this realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance'. Alysa's use of the journal suggests that journal writing may also be beneficial to White girls.

The girls' response patterns suggest that, although the small-group conversations may have been a reasonable way to initiate discussion of the body, they were not sufficient. Without the more private journal-writing opportunities, the girls may not have resisted the more dominant story-lines they developed during group conversations. Clearly more work needs to be done in this area before we can be more definitive. Nevertheless, our work is consistent with the perspective that methods as well as content are important pedagogical agendas. According to Roskelly (1998: 263):

Some of those methods change patterns of responsibility and authority in ways that promote consciousness of power relationships cross gender, cross race, cross class . . . Journal writing, dialogues, informal responses, and a host of other writing tasks can foster negotiation, challenging received ideas of all kinds, including privilege.

Imagining alternative worlds

Finally, we found that one strategy for helping the girls name forms of enculturation troubling them was to ask them to imagine that things were different and to explain what they hoped for and what they wished things could be like. It was within these spaces that they began to name more accurately how they were constructing the meanings of their bodies within the culture in which they lived, went to school, and in other ways participated. As Greene (1995) has suggested, the girls' responses provided evidence of the importance of imagination in critical activity such as this. According to Greene:

this passion of seeing things close up and large...is the doorway for imagination; here is the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise. This possibility...[of] looking at things large is what might move us on to reform (p. 16).

Although our initial intent was to have the girls imagine preferred possibilities for their lives through imagining an 'alternative society', we found this to be a particularly difficult task for them. Quite often the girls resisted imagining things as if they could be otherwise. They claimed that they 'couldn't do this', or that 'this is too hard for us'. Through their resistance to this task, however, they began to name more firmly the forms and processes of their own enculturation. When we asked them to imagine something better, they began to articulate more clearly the 'way things were'.

For example, when Kim asked the girls to imagine that there was no such thing as a perm, Nicole responded: 'If we didn't have perms we wouldn't know no better. If we didn't know that they existed we wouldn't want for them'. Kim reminded the girls about the time when Nicole said that African-American people used perms so that their hair would 'be straight like it's supposed to be'. This allowed Kim to ask, 'Who said it's supposed to be straight?' It was not until this point that they began to articulate more clearly the oppression. Nicole stated:

I mean, some, some races, well when we get perms we try to make, you know better ourselves because some other races already low rate us because of our colour. And being, you know, we just get perms because we don't want our hair to look, you know, despicable.

Conclusion

This curriculum project gives hope to the possibility of transformative physical education and language arts curricula focusing on the body. Through the interplay of opportunities to examine how the body has been represented by various media, with opportunities to write and talk about their experiences of their bodies, the girls were able to express some resistance to culturally dominant perspectives. Kim used an approach that combined course content from physical education and health classes with linguistic processes common in language arts and English classes. This

combination of content and process was somewhat useful for the intended purposes, suggesting the wisdom of further study and curriculum development.

For teachers and curriculum workers, these findings suggest the wisdom of exploring the possibilities of thematic study of the body for middle-school students. Such a study might intersect various subjects, not only physical education and language arts/English, while retaining the critical perspective that Kim nurtured through the questions she asked and the tasks she used. Language arts and English can offer the perspective of critical reading that has been identified as an important part of the curriculum in these subjects and defined as:

Reading a text in such a way as to question assumptions, explore perspectives, and critique underlying social and political values and stances. Critical reading is resistant, active, and focused on both the text and the world. Critical readers bring a range of experiences to texts, and, in turn, use texts to develop critical perspectives on personal and social experience (NCTE 1996: 71).

Besides joining these two subjects, we suggest that other curricular areas be included for this effort. Each curricular area can offer specialized knowledge about the body. In this work, however, it will be important to keep the girls' voices and the girls' concerns about their bodies at the forefront. To do otherwise would run the risk, that so many US physical educators have done, of continuing to silence girls by importing issues related to the body that adults find problematic or of interest (Sallis and McKenzie 1991, National Association of Sports 1995, Payne *et al.* 1997, Rimmer and Looney 1997). Brooker and MacDonald (1999: 84) claim:

While curriculum supposedly exists to serve the interests of learners, their preferences, if sought at all, are marginalized and their voices are mostly silent in curriculum making. This marginalization of student voice is of particular concern in such subjects as physical education...in which the essence of the subject is closely linked to the interests and culture of learners.

Indeed, it is notable that the girls seldom discussed the topics of sport or physical activity. In the few instances in which they did so, the topics were typically raised at Kim's prompting, and even then the girls did not sustain conversation on these topics. To keep the girls' voices and concerns central, we suggest the exploration of an inquiry curriculum in which learners are encouraged to ask questions about the body that are important to them and to explore the various curricular areas for evidence to inform their inquiries.

Within the language arts/English/literacy communities, inquiry teaching has been espoused as an empowering curricular process that involves many activities associated with literate behaviours. These include opportunities to interpret texts, say what they mean, relate texts to personal experience, make links across texts, explain and argue with various ideas, make predictions, hypothesize outcomes, compare and evaluate, and talk about doing these things (Heath and Mangiola 1991). This list is remarkably similar to the description of critical reading described in the English/

Language Arts National Standards document (NCTE 1996) quoted above, and it is very consistent with our work with our four adolescent collaborators. One suggestion for future efforts at this type of work is to continue beyond the period of a semester. Counter-cultural efforts perhaps require more extended periods of time if they are to have lasting effects.

Although the literacy community talks specifically about how to help students become critically literate, much more work needs to be done in physical education if students are to become critical consumers of popular physical culture (Kirk and Tinning 1990, Tinning and Fitzclarence 1992, Brooker and MacDonald 1999). The academic literature in physical education critically examines forms and processes of enculturation that are often disempowering and destructive to young people (Bain 1990, Theberge 1991, Vertinsky 1992, Kirk and Tinning 1994). This suggests that educators need to make a greater effort at developing ways of working with girls to help them learn these critical processes. Indeed, an important gift educators might give children is to create curriculum through which they can become literate beings whose bodies and minds are experienced as a cherished and inseparable dimension of being.

Acknowledgements

We thank Jerry Rosiek of the University of Alabama, David Kirk of Loughborough University, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.
2. The persistence of white supremacy in this part of the USA is evident in how the girls constructed beauty.

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