Adolescent Girls' Body-Narratives: Learning to Desire and Create a "Fashionable" Image

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This critical narrative inquiry took place in an inner city middle school in the southeast part of the country. The purpose of the study was to explore how four adolescent girls constructed the meanings of their bodies. Of interest were the stories girls told about their bodies and how their stories, cultural storylines, and images of women could empower and disempower girls in the process of becoming healthy women. The girls and I met 50 min twice a week for 15 weeks during their health and physical education class. Data collection techniques included 25 audiotaped and transcribed group discussions, journal writing, freewriting, written stories, and more. These girls were learning, through fashion, to desire and create a normalized image of the perfect woman. Fashion was a heuristic as they constructed the meanings of their bodies.

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.... Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: as sight. (Berger, 1972, p. 47)

Fashion was more than clothes and shoes, hairstyles and necessary hair products, or the right amount of makeup for Khalilah, Dauntai, Alysa, and Nicole. Fashion was a heuristic as they constructed the meanings of their bodies and subsequently a factor that empowered some and disempowered others in the process of becoming healthy women. Through fashion these four girls were learning to desire and create a normalized image of a perfect woman. They were beginning to embody this normalized image through the continual layering of cultural stories of women's bodies, which they saw, heard, told, internalized, and eventually participated in. In part, these girls were learning, through fashion, whether their bodies were "right" or "wrong," "normal" or "not normal." Fashion represented one of the cultural codes, or rules, if you will, that set the backdrop for the lives of these four adolescent girls as they began to develop into young women.

The purpose of this study was to understand how four adolescent girls constructed the meanings of their bodies. In undertaking this research I was interested in using methods that would create spaces for the girls' voices and benefit them in some way. This journey was about uncovering a silenced dialogue, one that has implications for a girl's healthy growth and development. As Greene (1995) writes, "The silences of women and the marginalized have still to be overcome in our classrooms" (p. 16). Part of the silencing of women is through the language of the body (Fine, 1993; Grumet, 1988).

For these four girls fashion was part of the language of the body. On the surface, fashion merely included the clothing styles "everybody" wore. If we hope to understand the deeper meanings of these girls' stories and listen to these girls' voices as they speak from their hearts words that can help educators and researchers understand them better. Without understanding the interior layers, all we have is surface knowledge. To create environments that better meet the needs of adolescent girls we must strive to understand these girls in their own terms. As we begin to see the complexity of how girls are learning to perceive their bodies, the story we will hear is deeply disturbing. Yet it is the critical interpretations of their often-unconscious meanings that help us understand them, the relationships they have and hope for, the culture in which they live, and how their health may subsequently be affected.

GIRLS' DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is a time of many changes; some of these changes are subtle, while others more transparent. Yet one of the most visibly striking changes of adolescence happens to a girl's body as her size, shape, and hormonal structures begin changing (Tanner, 1962). Girls tend to appear rounder as their hips widen and fat develops in the breasts, thighs, and buttocks (Dubas & Peterson, 1993). With these physical changes girls become increasingly more concerned with their bodies (Pipher, 1994). It is at the time girls experience these bodily changes and become softer and rounder that their culture tells them thin is beautiful, even imperative (Pipher, 1994; Rosenbaum, 1993).

Accompanying girls' bodily changes are psychological and sociological changes (Dubas & Peterson, 1993). Erikson (1968) claims adolescence is a time of "identity crisis." During this time the adolescent seeks to understand and accept both the self and one's society. Erikson (1968) further suggests that adolescence is a time for integrating the various identifications from childhood into a more complete identity. Adolescents seek to find their true selves through peers, clubs, religion, political movements, and more (Miller, 1993). Within these different groups adolescents try out

different roles—similar to trying on different clothes, looking for just the right outfit. Society helps guide adolescent girls in their decisions by providing messages of appropriate behavior (Miller, 1993). But what if society is guiding adolescent girls, through subtle, yet powerful, cultural storylines, toward an "unhealthy" outlook? That is, an outlook that encourages girls to view their bodies as objects for other people's aesthetic pleasure (Wolf, 1991)? Girl's and, subsequently, womens' identities and health become problems (Bordo, 1993; hooks, 1995; Levine, Smolak, & Hayden, 1994; Nagel & Jones, 1992; Usmiani & Dauiluk, 1997).

In looking at identity, many have argued (Belenky et al., 1986; Bloom & Munro, 1995; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al., 1988; hooks, 1990, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1993) that an objective correct definition of identity is not possible. So rather than Miller's (1993) suggestion that adolescent girls "find a true sense of self," it seems more appropriate to speak of girls as striving to construct a subjectively acceptable identity (hooks, 1990). Subjective identity is thought to always be active and continuously in the process of production (Bloom & Munro, 1995; hooks, 1990). Supposable "objective" definitions of identity actually hinder our understanding of girls' development and ways of being in the world. Such definitions "mask the critical role that language, social interaction, and pivotal experiences play in the production of subjectivity and ignore gender [and race] as a social position that influences the formation of subjectivity" (Bloom & Munro, 1995, p. 100).

Pipher (1994) suggests that the gap between girls' sense of self and cultural prescriptions of what is "right" for females creates enormous problems. American culture "smacks girls on the head in early adolescence" (Pipher, 1994, p. 23) as they enter the larger structure of their culture and the emphasis of the basis on which they are evaluated and judged shifts to their appearance. Language, as transmitted through cultural stories, becomes the mediating tool between the developing adolescent and her culture (Vygotsky, 1978). When societies focus on "body image" the body is no longer seen as subjectively experienced, but rather as an object (Rosenbaum, 1993). It is not surprising that adolescent girls are so concerned with their body image when music, billboards, television, books, and movies emphasize girls' and women's physical appearance (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Harper & Marshall, 1991; Levine et al., 1994; Miller, 1993; Wolf, 1991).

There are a number of theoretical and often abstract discussions on the body as a site of power (Foucault, 1977, 1985; Harvey & Sparks, 1991; Theberge, 1991) or as a rendering of cultural rules and social control (Bordo, 1989, 1993; Frank, 1991; Shilling, 1993). Yet there is very little qualitative research where the subjectively experienced body is a direct focus of analysis (Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Markula, 1995; Sparkes, 1996;

Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992). Through the literature it becomes very clear that oppressive stories and images of the body, particularly womens' bodies, are culturally inescapable.

The oppressive cultural stories and images that girls are confronted with daily (Berger, 1972; Kissling, 1991; Pipher, 1994; Theberge, 1991; Wolf, 1991) require them to have the ability to critically examine these images and stories if they are to become healthy women. The body is an important focus in the lives of adolescent girls and is at the heart of their crisis in confidence (Barbieri, 1995; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Esson, 1995; Pipher, 1994; Rogers, Brown, & Tappan, 1994). While girls' concerns, preoccupations, and anxieties about their bodies occur repeatedly within the literature on adolescent girls, how they construct the meanings of their bodies tends to be marginalized in the research on early adolescent girls (Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992). Sparkes (1997) claims we need to begin seeking an understanding of how the body and self are socially constructed through cultural stories so that these stories can be challenged and, over time, changed. If educators can begin to better understand how adolescent girls construct the meanings of their bodies, we may be better able to create learning opportunities and educational environments that liberate and empower girls to become healthy women.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This is a co-constructed critical narrative created from multiple stories shared between four adolescent girls and me. The stories we hear and the stories we tell, whether personal or fictional, shape the meaning and quality of our lives at every crossroad. These stories show us whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced; whose histories are valued and whose are devalued (Gilbert, 1994). Stories connect us with others, and with our own histories, through time, place, character, and advice on how we might live our lives (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Witherell & Nodding, 1991). Stories bring our past together with our present, and offer visions of possible futures.

Narrative inquiry uses stories to describe how people construct the meanings of their lives (Bruner, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). "Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." That is, "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (pp. 2–3). In this paper, story is used to describe the girls'

verbal and written conversations about their hopes, fears, dreams, and anxieties as experienced through their perceptions of their bodies.

Stories circulate within and between cultures and individuals; they help shape girls' identities. How girls construct the meanings of their bodies is determined, in part, by the stories available to them within their culture (Sparkes, 1997). Shilling (1993) claims that how the body is socially constructed "provides important insights into how bodies are affected by power relations, how the body enters into social definitions of the self, . . . how the body can function as a social symbol . . . [and] be used to legitimize social inequalities" (p. 99). As Frank (1991) claims, we have learned through feminism that the story of domination begins and ends with the body.

The emphasis on women's appearance is an ancient, yet ongoing, cultural story (Berger, 1972; Wolf, 1991). "Stories are constructed by others and, then, taught and learned. But once internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 287). Those who hold the power create cultural stories. Delpit (1995) suggests the culture of power is enacted throughout our educational systems. This culture of power is also enacted through other avenues as well (e.g., television, magazines, advertisements, movies). Of particular importance to understanding Nicole, Alysa, Khalilah, and Dauntai's perceptions of their bodies are the certain aspects of power Delpit (1995) discusses. She suggests that "there are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a 'culture of power'" (p. 25). These rules or codes are enacted through visual and verbal representations, ways of talking, acting, or dressing, for example. The rules and codes of a culture reflect the interests and values of those who hold the power in that culture. For those who do not have the power, making the rules explicit makes acquiring the power easier (Delpit, 1995). Finally, she suggests that "those with power are frequently least aware of—or least [less] willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (Delpit, 1995, p. 26).

MAKING A CHOICE: WHICH GIRLS' VOICES WILL BE HEARD?

Sitting in a student teacher meeting with several secondary health and physical education cooperating teachers I was introduced to Michael Scott.[1] Mr. Scott taught at Dogwood Middle School in an inner city southeastern community. Dogwood was a magnet school with a technology emphasis. The school's student population was predominantly African American or, as described by one eighth-grade girl, "This is a Black school in a Black neighborhood."

At the time I met Mr. Scott I was interested in doing some pilot testing and needed a school with which to work. Mr. Scott extended an open invitation for me to come out to his health and physical education classes

any time I wanted. Each week for the next 6 months I attended two to three classes and worked with a variety of students. At the end of the school year I asked Mr. Scott if he would be willing to let me work with some of his students the following year when I began my study. He agreed, as did his principal and school district.

Going into the study I already knew many of the students from the previous year and felt comfortable within the school itself. During the second week of school I distributed permission slips to three different health and physical education classes taught by Mr. Scott. I explained to the students that I would be working with a few people two days a week for the entire semester. I asked them to take home the permission slips, read through them with a parent or guardian, and if interested return the signed permission slips to Mr. Scott as soon as possible. During the week that I was waiting for the permission slips to be returned I attended the three classes and participated in the physical education activities with the students. It was pre–fitness testing time so most of our time spent together involved running. I would run and talk with a variety of girls wondering which ones would participate in the study. At the end of the week about half of the students in all three classes returned signed permission slips.

I learned from my pilot study that, when combined, written stories and pictures were useful in understanding students' thoughts and feelings. Additionally, I had come across a technique called "freewriting" (Barbieri, 1995). The idea behind freewriting is that the writer writes 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 . . . [in] the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel" (Goldberg, 1986).

I asked the students from three health and physical education classes to do three tasks. The first task was a freewriting exercise. I gave each student who was allowed to participate a 5×8 notecard and asked them to write whatever came to mind on the topic, "Someone who is in good shape." When they finished I asked them to take another 5×8 notecard and write a story about a 12- or 13-year-old girl or boy who was in good shape. The third task was to draw a picture to go with their story. I suggested that they use their freewriting to help them write their story.

As I read through the stories and freewriting sheets I was looking for detail in description. I was also looking for things that caught my attention or captured my curiosity. Given the duration of the study I needed girls who were able and willing to communicate in writing. Additionally, I was most interested in the first class because it was 10 min longer than any

other class period and would give me more time with the girls. The four girls selected were all in the same class. I did not know any of these girls from the previous year. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms the girls chose themselves.

Khalilah was a 13-year-old African American/Indian Muslim in the eighth grade. She was from a middle-class family. Khalilah described herself: "I'm 5 feet 2 inches, 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 eighth-grade African American from a middle-class family. She described herself as "light skinned, nice, intelligent, 5 feet 5 inches, 110 pounds, a good entertainer." Alysa was a 13-year-old eighth-grade Caucasian from a lower-middle-class single-parent family. She described herself thus: "I'm nice, funny, caring, 5 feet 2 inches, I wear a 5-6 in jeans. . . . I have green eyes and brown hair." Dauntai was a 14-year-old eighth-grade African American from a lower-middle-class family. Dauntai described herself: "I am short, light skin, short hair, hazel eyes. I am a nice fun person to be around. I like doing things with movement." These four girls were in the International Bound Program and therefore had all their classes together with the exception of elective courses. While all four girls knew each other, Khalilah, Dauntai, and Nicole participated in a step group together outside of school. These three girls shared a special bond that did not include Alysa.

The bond that grew between the five of us as the study progressed provoked many ethical concerns. As a researcher involved in the lives of young people, I am constantly reminded of these words from bell hooks: "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 43). In hopes of framing these girls' stories in the most ethical and authentic way possible, I strive to place their voices at the center of the analysis. This effort did not eliminate the fact that I am an outsider, and their stories are interpreted through my lens. I am a 30-year-old Caucasian woman who grew up in an upper-middle-class family. I was raised in a small, but highly educated, predominantly White community in the high desert of Southern California. While my background and experiences are different in many ways from these four girls', a commonality we share is that we all live in a culture that places great value on the way women appear. The sad reality remains, however, that as a society we privilege certain "looks" over others, and in many ways as a physical educator my appearance approximates the culturally dominate image. I am aware that my own anger at being controlled by disabling cultural stereotypes enters into my study in ways I do not fully understand, and hence, cannot fully control for.

DATA COLLECTION

Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa, Dauntai, and I met in a private classroom for 15 consecutive weeks every Tuesday and Thursday for 50 min each day. Khalilah missed one day because of a field trip, and Alysa came late one day. With these exceptions everyone met all 25 days.

I was seeking understanding from the girls' perspectives; therefore it was important that my methods be responsive. I continually sought to find ways to support the girls' voices. I started the conversation, listened to what the girls were saying, and tried to respond to their leads (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). I tried to help them find ways to better name the meanings of their experiences (Greene, 1988) as related to their bodies, and continually asked them to imagine beyond the actual and envision preferred possibilities (Edelsky, 1994; Greene, 1995). It is only after we can name the meanings of our experiences that we can become more critical and imagine alternative or better possibilities (Greene, 1988, 1995; hooks, 1995). Thus as researchers there is the potential for our research to be transformative (Benmayor, 1991; Greene, 1995; Lincoln, 1996). Lincoln (1996) suggests that reciprocity is a criterion for quality in interpretive research.

When we first met as a group I asked the girls to do personal maps and personal biographies. The intent was to begin understanding a little about their lives. Hatch & Wisniewski (1995) suggest that understanding individual lives is central in the narrative research process. I asked the girls to draw a map indicating the spaces in which they spent time during the day from the moment they woke up until they went to bed. I asked them to label each place, tell me what they did in these spaces, how much time they spent there, and who was there. I gave them six pieces of colored paper and each time they changed spaces they were to change colors of paper. Their personal biographies were a series of questions, for example, what they liked and disliked, what they enjoyed watching on television, what they liked to read, what they wished adults and their peers understood about them the most, their favorite physical activity, what makes them smile, and more. Later the girls talked individually with me about their maps and personal biography papers.

Throughout the course of the study I also asked the girls do a variety of freewriting exercises (Barbieri, 1995). The theme was usually "the body" and I would change the beginning sentence. For example, the theme was the body and they were to begin each sentence with "I'm afraid that . . ." or "Sometimes I wish . . ." or "I hope . . . ." The girls also did a series of written stories and information pieces. The topics they wrote about came from our group conversations and the themes that were emerging in the study. The girls seemed to have an easier time talking if they did some type of writing first. Occasionally I asked them to draw pictures to go with their stories, as some of the emerging themes were difficult to articulate in words.

In addition to the freewriting exercises, written stories, and information pieces, I asked the girls to keep journals. Journal writing is a form of self-reflection and self-analysis. "Voices in the culture are constructed voices that mirror an integration of the individual voice and common cultural voices" (Cooper, 1991, p. 110). Initially I intended the journals to be a place where the girls would document the times they noticed their bodies. I asked them to write about when they noticed their bodies, what they were doing when they noticed their bodies, what they were thinking, and what they were feeling. As the study progressed the journals became a private space where I could dialogue with each girl. They wrote about their personal thoughts and feelings, oftentimes discussing issues that we had talked about in the group. Seldom, if ever, did they mention the things from their journals in our group discussions.

As an educator I believe that ethical research requires us to give back to our participants rather than merely take from them. Many of the girls' conversations illuminated how powerfully the dominant discourse operates to maintain its power. As I began to recognize how subtly these girls were being manipulated into participating in activities that perpetuate multiple forms of oppression, the topics for writing and group discussions shifted. I asked the girls to begin imagining a world that was different. The intent was to help the girls begin to think critically about some of the issues they were writing about and discussing. My hope with having the girls critically critiquing some of their conversations was an attempt to help them become more aware of how certain forms of oppression work. As a group we created an "alternative society." I combined all the major themes from both their journals and group discussions and asked them to imagine these things did not exist. For example, I asked them to imagine a world where everyone was blind, where there were no fashion magazines, no MTV, no perms for our hair, no masculine or feminine labels; imagine a world where girls and boys did not care about what we looked like, they only cared about what we had to say. We discussed what a world could be like without some of these things. In asking the girls to imagine something different, not only did they begin thinking more critically, they began better to name forms of body oppression.[2]

The most important method for this paper was our magazine exploration, which I will discuss thoroughly later. As multiple forms of representation allow for different meanings to emerge (Eisner, 1993, 1997), using visuals seemed appropriate for several reasons. First, magazine images could help girls reveal meanings about the body that were difficult to understand through written or verbal discourses. Second, adolescence is the time when girls are being initiated into a culture that places great importance on women's bodies through visual representations such as magazines, billboards, and television (Berger, 1972; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994;

Wolf, 1991). Thus, as girls begin participating in their cultures' oppressive language, they too become more concerned with their own body image (Vygotsky, 1978). Understanding the images they looked at seemed important to understanding how they were constructing the meanings of their bodies.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was twofold. First was the process I undertook daily for the duration of the study. After each meeting with the girls I would listen to the audiotapes while driving home, discuss with a friend what I was hearing during our daily runs, and transcribe the tapes. I would write fieldnotes and vignettes about what I was hearing and seeing, and read the girls' journals and other artifacts. I kept a research journal with my reactions to things the girls said that captured my attention as well as topics and issues the girls discussed. I wrote back to the girls in their journals asking questions or responding to their entries or the questions they asked. I took my interpretations back to the girls each day to be validated, transformed, or rejected. Each conversation emerged from the previous day's discussion as I was trying to be responsive to what the girls were saying publicly and writing privately.

The second aspect of data analysis was in the multiple readings of the girls' stories (i.e., data). I was continually reading and rereading the transcripts, written artifacts, and journals, coding key words, phrases, and ideas. About halfway through the study three major themes appeared. These three themes would later become the lenses through which I read all of their stories, as multiple readings render multiple meanings (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The girls talked about their bodies in relation to culture, to others, and to themselves. However, all three ways intertwine and to separate them would lose their contextual meanings. As I began looking at how the girls talked about their bodies in culture, in relation to others, and in relation to themselves, subthemes were formed. Because I agree with Lincoln (1996) that research is first and foremost a community project, I selected the aspects of the overall conversations that in my interpretation seemed most important to the girls. From there I cut and pasted all their written artifacts, conversations, and journals that fit within the four subthemes and created a narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995).[3]

With these thoughts as a preface I invite you to experience, through Alysa's, Nicole's, Dauntai's, and Khalilah's eyes, one way they were constructing the meanings of their bodies. As you read, pay close attention to how their interpretations may serve to empower and disempower them in the process of becoming healthy women. There are many times these girls were publicly in agreement, for at this age the fear of being "too different"

oftentimes silences individual voices (Barbieri, 1995; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyon, & Hanmer, 1990). Other times their individual voices speak loud and clear, voices that illuminate the dialectic between individuals and the socially constructed storylines of gender, race, religion, socioeconomic, and peer status in which they participated.

THE STORY OF "FASHION IN" AND "FASHION OUT"

Sitting at a table with a dozen or so different magazines scattered around, I asked the girls to go through the magazines and cut out pictures that were of interest to them. Most of the magazines were ones they had indicated they read such as *YM, Ebony, Teen, Glamour, Black Hairstyles*, and more. In addition, I included *Women's Sport and Fitness* and *Shape* to see if they would look at the health-related information. I wanted the girls to create categories for their pictures and asked whether they wanted to create their own categories or work as a group. Khalilah responded immediately, "I want, I want to do it together. You all wanna do it together?" They agreed working in a group would be more fun.

So Khalilah, Dauntai, and Nicole began flipping through magazines, talking and laughing as they cut pictures, consulting each other as they proceeded. My job was to label the folders of the categories they created. The girls started forming categories with their pictures not long after the process began. "Role Models" and "Beauty" were their first two categories, followed shortly by "Fashion In," "Fashion Out," and "Healthy Hair." Alysa joined the group late that day, after the categories were formed. She added pictures to the already created categories but was not part of the language construction and, consequently, the group often silenced her voice.

After the girls finished cutting pictures and creating categories I asked them to explain each category and why each picture was in that particular category. As the girls began to explain their categories and pictures the story about being "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out" emerged. This paper is the story of "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out" and what it meant to Khalilah, Nicole, Alysa, and Dauntai. Through fashion these girls were constructing multiple meanings of their bodies. Their bodies were a central part of how they were learning about normality, their relationships with others, and what society values in women. These girls were learning that their bodies could be, or needed to be, manipulated and controlled to create the desired images they associated with "Fashion In."

The two predominant criteria for being "Fashion In" were "looking right" and being "normal." According to Nicole, Khalilah, Alysa, and Dauntai, to "look right" and be "normal" girls need "healthy hair," the "right clothes and shoes," the right "body shape," and they must "look feminine." These girls described others, and felt they could be described by other girls, as

being "Fashion In" or "Fashion Out" depending on whether they met or failed to meet the above criteria.

Those who could model the fashion became what the girls called "role models." These role models set the standard for what the girls perceived as right and normal. "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out" were the girls' terms, the interpretive codes they used to describe what looking right and being normal were all about. A more critical interpretation of their terms, "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out," illuminates how these girls' bodies were a space for them to learn to internalize various forms of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism.

Looking "Right" and "Normal"

The specific criteria the girls identified for being "Fashion In" centered around healthy hair, clothes and shoes, body shape, and being "feminine." However, the underlying factor in determining whether the images were acceptable were whether a girl "looks right" and thus, is "normal." Being normal was about "looking" a certain way, what I term a "normalized image" of the perfect woman. While these girls individualized this normalized image, they did so within the criteria of "Fashion In."

> Nicole: Fashion Out is, I mean, somebody could be put in a Fashion Out category because they look weird. But that doesn't mean that your fashion is out, I mean, well it means that it's out and it's really not out because everybody has a right to look the way they want to. But just because they don't look normal or whatever they are in Fashion Out.

> Researcher: OK. So normal, you've got to look normal not to be in Fashion Out? What's normal?

> Nicole: You know . . . like your hair is fixed like in a normal way and your clothes look decent.

> Alysa: I think, well it depends on who you are, because when some people, if some people have round faces and some people have oval faces like um, like one person can like go with short hair if they have like a round face or something, but it they have an oval face they can have the exact same hairdo but it won't look right and that could be Fashion Out with that kind of face.

> Researcher: OK OK so you've gotta have a hairstyle that goes with the shape of your face?

> Dauntai: Yeah. . . . You gotta look right with short hair.

After several days of discussing what is right and what is normal, Nicole brought me a piece of paper with the following written passage. This was not something that I asked Nicole to write, it was something she thought was important for me to understand. Nicole claims anyone can determine what is "right" but they do not get to determine whether it is considered "normal":

> I feel that being in Fashion In is when you look right which is determined by you and look normal which is determined by people. I think Fashion Out is not in style [and] doesn't look normal. If it's right depends on the person because some people like punk rockers think it's normal to wear their hair the way they do. Just because it's not normal people say it's Fashion Out.

Normality was given over to other people's perceptions of how you "look." Thus, those with the power to create the images deemed acceptable for girls and women will determine what looks "normal." These girls think they set the standards, when in actuality they may unconsciously be perpetuating standards set by others.

Researcher: Who tells us what right is?

Alysa: Ourselves.

Nicole: When you're brought up you're taught, most people teach their kids to be neat, and then you know, you listen to people talkin' about people and everyday about how their hair and stuff look, that just make you want to um, you know, feel like you should do everything right.

Researcher: OK, but is there a difference between what we think is right and what, (she did not let me finish)

Nicole: Well normal and right, well you determine if something is right yourself, but normal is how people look at you every day.

Researcher: OK, so what is right is determined by you, you determine right?

Nicole: Yeah.

Researcher: And what is normal is how other people think of you? So other people, you could tell me if I'm normal or not?

Nicole: Yeah.

Nicole believed she determined what was "right" but others determined what was "normal." Normal was associated, in part, with the narrowly defined images they saw of women through fashion. This puts twist into the story,

for the girls could wear, act, or look the way they felt was "right," but they did not get to determine whether it "looked normal." Furthermore, girls must "look right" and "normal" to be "Fashion In." They do not determine what is right, for if it does not go with what others say is normal, they are "Fashion Out."

"Healthy hair."   The girls identified "Healthy Hair" as one of the criteria that determined whether a girl would be considered by her peers "Fashion In" or "Fashion Out." Among some of the looks they associated with healthy hair was hair that looked "conditioned," "shiny," "sparkly," "has no split ends," "no new growth that can be seen," and "is straight." The girls perceived healthy hair as something they could create by purchasing and using certain products. Some of these girls were internalizing racism (hooks, 1995).

Nicole: Well see with us three [Dauntai, Khalilah, & Nicole] we get perms . . . you know how if you got a perm it makes your hair more straight. . . . We get one [a perm] because this, [points to wavy part] you can see where it grew. . . . So you have to get a new perm cause you got new growth. . . . And you have to treat that with the perm too.

Researcher: Oh, it makes your hair straight when you get a perm? . . . But what if you don't perm your hair?

Nicole & Dauntai: It looks a mess!

Khalilah: It gets all wrinkly and stuff. . . . It look terrible!

Nicole: See your hair is not like ours.

Researcher: Oh OK, so does everybody perm their hair?

Khalilah: No, if you need it.

Nicole: No, if you cannot afford a perm. I mean some people's hair is just so, you know, it's not funny because they look like a doggy . . . and you know it makes their hair real thick . . . it just be coming down and it look like wool. . . . It looks a mess.

Khalilah: You feel like just going out and buying 'em a perm. Ask 'em when their birthday is and go buy them a perm.

Nicole: You do!

Dauntai, Nicole, and Khalilah would tell you if you are an African American or Indian girl with "wrinkly" or "woolly" hair you better change what is natural if you want to fit the image so you do not "look a mess." Their culturally normalized image of the perfect woman has straight hair, regard-

less of what is natural to the individual person. These girls were learning that "healthy" is a look they could create. Yet the look is not natural for everyone, thus not an empowering or realistic image of "health" for many.

Researcher: So what else makes your hair . . . healthy?

Nicole: Hot oil treatment. . . . I mean it all depends on your hair.

Alysa: What does a hot oil treatment do?

Nicole: It just sets your hair . . . like you know how some people just can't wear their hair down because . . . well people with our [Nicole, Dauntai, & Khalilah] hair, you know, it just doesn't stay down like it's suppose to, so the hot oil treatment would help it to lay better.

For a girl to be "Fashion In" her hair needs to "look right," which means it needs to be "straight." So within this particular criterion, that is, "healthy hair," a girl's race and hair type contribute to whether she would meet the criteria naturally or if she would need economic power to buy the racist image, an image they called "healthy." I am left wondering what happens to girls when they learn health is merely an image, and one that excludes many.

The right clothes and shoes. "Healthy hair" was only one part of being "Fashion In," however. Clothes and shoes were the next criteria the girls identified to determine whether someone would be considered "Fashion In" or "Fashion Out." Dauntai wrote one day describing "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out":

> I can describe fashion in better than I can describe fashion out. The people in our group that I would consider to be fashion in are Nicole, Khalilah, and myself [Dauntai]. The reason being is because we wear name brand clothes, shoes. Also the way we wear our clothes. . . . When a person is fashion out they will usually get talked about by other people to other people. Although it's not nice to talk about people it's something that just happen. . . . Another type of fashion out can be like if a person wears . . . no name brand shoes. Some people might not be able to afford shoes that everybody else wear so they'll just have to settle for what they can get. . . . If mostly everybody wear name brand shoes like Reebok, Nike, Adidas and you wear P.F. Flyers, Chic, or another type of bo-bo shoe you will get talked about. . . . Really I can't explain fashion-out but I can show what it look like. . . . Although people have different opinions most people that dress the same way will think the same and consider the same thing as fashion

out. (Dauntai, written description of what happens if you are Fashion In or Fashion Out, November 7, 1996)

Dauntai did not consider Alysa "Fashion In" because of the brands of clothes she wore as well as how she looked in these clothes. Alysa did not have the economic buying power required to create the right "look." There was more, however, to Dauntai's opinion about why she considered herself, Nicole, and Khalilah "Fashion In," but not Alysa. Perceived racial differences became part of the process for determining who was considered "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out."

Nicole: And also our clothes and how we dress.

Khalilah: Is different from White people. . . . We like buyin' more. Like you see Black people buy more clothes.

Researcher: OK, do you think there's a reason why you buy more clothes . . . that Black people buy more than White people?

Khalilah: Appearance, they like to look neat. I mean, you know, I'm not sayin' that White people don't like to look neat [she says this softly]. . . . Cause they, it seem like they don't really care. Some do, but it seem like they just put their clothes on, shoes, come to school. But we have to go and we have to have a new shirt, we have to be clean. I cannot wear no dirty white sneakers and you know we look, and their shoes be dull, they be dirty.

Researcher: Do you agree with this? [I ask Alysa]

Alysa: With me, I like to shop and get new clothes but I can't because, well my mom won't let me go to the mall.

Dauntai, Khalilah, and Nicole perceived the differences in dress as racial differences, not social class differences. Alysa, on the other hand, did not attribute these differences to race. She wanted to buy new clothes but was unable to. Further, Alysa claimed that some of the clothes she wears were once her mother's and aunt's. The girls' culturally normalized image of the perfect woman was expensive.

Researcher: There's a Nike shoe in here, how is that Fashion In?

All at the same time: Because it's name brand.

Nicole: Because it's Nike. . . . Nike always be in.

Researcher: What if it was Reebok, would that be in?

All of them: Yeah.

Researcher: So is it any name?

Nicole: But not the $29.99 pair of Reeboks.

Khalilah: It got to be at least $50.

Nicole: I mean it also depends on the price.

Researcher: So what if you can't afford to pay for these, then you can't be in?

Khalilah: No it's different kinds of shoes and stuff, everybody wear Reebok Classics, that in all the time, that's in every year.

The image of the perfect woman is adorned in name brand clothes and shoes that cost a certain amount of money. A girl must have economic buying power to "look right." Although Khalilah thought Reebok Classics was an option for everyone, that option was not actually attainable by all people. Thus if a girl does not come from a family with economic buying power, she is forced to find other means or she cannot create the images perceived by others as "normal." Lack of economic power eliminates a large number of girls from what the culture of power portrays as "normal" and, sadly, their bodies become more like objects, or displays, to perpetuate the images deemed powerful in culture.

The look of a model.   While name brand clothes and shoes that cost a certain amount of money were central to the criteria of whether a girl would be "Fashion In" or "Fashion Out," there was more to the right clothes. A girl must also "look like a model" in these clothes.

Researcher: Why is she fashionable?

Nicole: Because she look like a model, that look like something a model would wear. . . . Because you know how when um people put on their clothes and they just look nice in them. I mean, see somebody can put on this dress and it wouldn't look like that on somebody else.

Khalilah: Uh huh.

Nicole: I don't know, it's just something about how models put on their clothes. It makes them look like they have class . . . well they have, of course they have people to fix their clothes like they're suppose to look. But when people buy the stuff it's not gonna really look like this on them unless they really know how it's suppose to look. Cause I'm sure somebody is gettin' paid to make them look like this.

The image of the perfect woman looks like a model: the way you are "suppose to look." The models on television and in magazines today are often computer-manipulated images and thus create representations that are not, or cannot, ever be achieved by a girl unless she seriously jeopardizes her health (Pipher, 1994). Yet, girls are looking to these images as the norm for judging themselves and others. With each additional criterion for "Fashion In" more girls who cannot model the perfect image are eliminated. The more the girls try to fit this normalized image, the more they have to internalize the multiple forms of racism, sexism, and classism that are operating to perpetuate the dominant discourse.

Body shape.   The fourth criterion the girls identified for "Fashion In" was body shape. This criterion could have potentially devastating health effects. Similar to "healthy hair," I interpreted body shape as a disabling and disempowering criterion. A self-perceptive, self-aware girl could acquire a sense of what is right and healthy for her unique body and have this feeling rejected by the culturally constructed image of the norm. What is biologically right for an individual and what is visually constructed as normal may not be the same. While girls can buy the other criteria for the images they perceived as normal, such as "healthy hair," or the "right clothes and shoes," a girl cannot purchase her shape. Nicole writes, however, that a girl needs the right shape to wear some of the clothes considered "Fashion In":

I knew a girl who was overweight who like to dress like all the rest of the young girls but there was a problem, she wasn't qualified to wear some of the belly shirts and short skirts like everyone else. Well some of the things people said about her wasn't nice. For one they said things like she is too big to wear that short skirt and anyway it's fashion out for her because it's just not meant for her to wear it. Well what I'm trying to say is just because you are overweight and try to wear something like the other girls that are smaller than you it can be fashion out for the heavier person. If you look right and there's a certain style out that's a little exposing it would be fashion in. If you can't wear it then it's fashion out. I think heavier people have clothes that are fashion in, but they want to be like all of the other young people.

Although Nicole wrote as if "Fashion In" was something everyone could achieve with certain clothes regardless of body shape, she and Dauntai rejected her interpretation on another occasion:

Nicole: It [Fashion In] also depends on if something looks right on you. Everybody can't wear what's Fashion In, because everybody, I mean you can wear it but it's not going to look right.

Dauntai: It's not gonna look right.

Nicole: Just like we were talking about heavier people wearing tights, Khalilah said their rolls and stuff look like they're uncomfortable, and well, . . . if you see two thin people wearing tights and it was "in" that would be Fashion In, but if you seen a heavier person wearing tights it would be Fashion Out because it's just not right.

Dauntai: It depends.

Nicole: It's not, I didn't mean to say that, but it's, it's not that it's not right, but it's it's not appropriate.

Dauntai: I think that . . . some big people look right in them [tights] and some people don't. But if you wear a big shirt it don't look that bad . . . they kinda hide your, whatever, fat, or whatever you want to call it. They hide that [your fat] so you can't really see it that much.

The image of a perfect woman does not have fat, or at least fat that others can see. Many of the fashions these girls categorize as "Fashion In" do not hide a girl's shape, but rather accentuate and/or expose a girl's body. Within the public conversations the girls talked about "other" girls' bodies, not necessarily their own. Within the private conversations the girls talked about their own body shape. Fashion was a factor that contributed to how Alysa felt about her own body.

"I think about my body (looks) all the time. Since I like wearing short shirts I'm always thinking about sucking in my stomach" (Alysa, journal entry, October 5, 1996). "Today I thought about my body all day! The shirt I was wearing was making me look fat so I had to suck 'it' in all day" (Alysa, journal entry, October 8, 1996). Khalilah, on the other hand, was more concerned with someone seeing her body. "Every time I'm about to get in the shower I always notice my body. I usually think, maybe I need to loose 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 w/ it" (Khalilah, journal entry, October 5, 1996).

These girls are beginning to internalize narrowly defined cultural norms of beauty (Wolf, 1991). As they do, they become more concerned with how their body looks in relation to the culturally generated images portrayed as normal.

Women should be feminine.   Femininity was not a criterion identified by the girls for being "Fashion In." However, femininity was tied in with looking right; and looking right was part of the criteria for being "Fashion In." Femininity was an underlying factor for their normalized image of the perfect woman.

Researcher: What do you think of her? [I pointed to a tall African American women dancer; you can see the muscles in her legs.]

Alysa: That's sick. . . . Too muscular. . . . I just think women should be feminine . . . you know, not where you can see the muscle cause I think that's masculine.

Researcher: Oh, so muscular is a masculine trait?

Alysa: No it's just seeing the muscle.

Researcher: What does feminine look like?

Alysa: Just like you can have muscle but not really see a lot of it. You don't look fat you just don't have muscle.

Not only are well-developed muscles a sign of strength, but muscle is important to our metabolic functioning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Alysa did not perceive women that looked muscular as feminine. Weak is a feminine look, yet a weak look may not necessarily be healthy, and it may serve as an avenue for domination and oppression (Bordo, 1989, 1993).

Researcher: I'm still curious, Alysa, why you don't think it's OK for too much muscle to show.

Alysa: I don't know, I just think that men . . . everybody should have the muscle, but men should show it and women shouldn't.

Dauntai: I don't agree with her.

Researcher: You don't what Dauntai?

Nicole: I don't either.

Dauntai: I don't agree with her [Alysa] cause she said that men should show, men don't necessarily have to show their muscles, I don't think so.

Researcher: What do you think about women?

Dauntai: Women they don't have to necessarily not show their muscles. It's all, it depends, it depends upon you how you are, how you want to look like, and what looks best on you, what you think looks best on you.

Whether Dauntai was resisting oppressive gender construction, or rejecting Alysa's beliefs, remains in question. Regardless, her resistance expanded the images and possibilities for both men and women. This expansion was something these girls desperately needed given the extent to which they were conforming to multiple forms of body oppression.

Looking feminine was also about how a girl acted. I asked the girls to write about how they experienced their bodies in multiple settings. Khalilah wanted to read what she wrote about how she experienced her body around boys:

Khalilah: I make sure I'm not loud and rude.

Researcher: Loud and rude, what would loud and rude be?

Khalilah: Talkin' all loud sayin' stupid stuff, like some girls . . . they just say stuff and it sounds stupid. . . . They think they sound cute but it it make them look ignorant.

Researcher: OK, so things could make you look ignorant if you say the wrong thing? Is it important (she did not let me finish)

Khalilah: And if you have a big mouth, always runnin' your mouth all the time. I don't know, just sayin' stupid stuff.

Researcher: And this is only girls that do this?

Khalilah: I don't know, boys do it too.

Nicole: It's better for, it's always better for the boy to do that.

Khalilah: Than the girl.

Nicole: Because it looks better, I mean, the girl shouldn't act like that because . . . it's not feminine.

A girl cannot be "loud and rude" and still create this normalized image of the perfect woman because it would not "look" feminine. Thus a girl who is assertive and voices her opinions can be perceived as "loud and rude." This is reminiscent of Bordo's (1989) claims about cultural images of femininity as "pretty," "passive," and "quiet." For a girl to "look" feminine within this cultural image she needs to silence her voice.

The Perfect Woman

Many of the cultural stories of women these girls were seeing, hearing, and telling did not center on how they function as healthy human beings or develop into whole people, but rather how they can manipulate their bodies to create visual images that conform to cultural norms. These girls were learning that the "look" was what is important (Featherstone, 1991). As I began to notice how dominant "the look" was in their body constructions I asked the girls to do another freewriting exercise; the theme was "The Perfect Woman" (Table 1). The focus for all four girls was the perfect look centered on the "Fashion In" criteria. Only Khalilah and Alysa mentioned

Table 1. Girls' perceptions of "the perfect woman"

Themes and Subthemes	Dauntai	Khalilah	Nicole	Alysa
The Perfect Body				
Nice shape	x	x	x	
Skinny	x			x
Not fat	x		x	
Not too.tall	x		x	
Tall				x
Model	x			
The Perfect Face				
Hairstyle fits her face	x		x	x
Pretty eyes		x	x	x
Pretty teeth		x	x	x
Not too much makeup	x		x	x
Pretty hair		x	x	
Nice lips		x		
Pretty face			x	
Pierced ears		x		
The Perfect Clothes				
Nice clothes		x	x	x
Looks nice in clothes	x		x	
Outfit just right (earrings, clothes, shoes, makeup)			x	
The Nice Girl				
Nice personality/friendly		x		
Nice to everyone				x
Not mean/no enemies				x
Other				
Good family				x
Hard worker/gets good grades				x

something other than a look. I strongly believe girls need to learn that women are more than their looks.

The concerns these girls had about how they looked are real; not looking right eliminates them from gaining access to social power. On the surface, their conversations about their bodies may seem like simple adolescent chitchat about fashion. Yet the stories girls tell to others become their way of acting together (Gilbert, 1994). When girls' conversations are laced with internalized sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism the possibilities they are creating for themselves and others become limited and, therefore, freedom is lost. Not only can listening to the stories adolescent girls tell about their bodies help us to better understand how their health may be affected, their stories will help those who are different from them understand them better. Or as Dauntai wrote, "This group . . . gave me a chance . . . to tell an older person how younger people are because some

older people don't understand and they act like they don't want to take the time to listen to what other younger people are like or what they think" (Dauntai, journal entry, November 26, 1996).

Dauntai's comment, "They [adults] act like they don't want to take the time to listen . . ." leaves me wondering about what can happen if we truly listen. Listening can be frightening as we begin to see parts of a world we helped create that serve to benefit a select and limited population at the expense of many others. It is not comfortable when you wake up and realize that you are as much a cause of oppression as a potential way out. I wonder what effect my own internalization of the culturally ideal body image has had on my students over the years. The sad realization that accompanied the girls' story of "Fashion In" and "Fashion Out" was that the images Dauntai, Alysa, Nicole, and Khalilah were learning to desire and create required them, in part, to see their bodies as objects (Bordo, 1989) for other people's aesthetic viewing pleasure.

BODY AS OBJECT: WOMAN AS IMAGE

Cultural stories have created the image of the perfect woman, but these images portray a woman as an object (Berger, 1972; Bordo, 1989, 1993; Wolf, 1991), not a person. As the girls learn the stories of how to desire becoming an image they simultaneously hinder their abilities to develop into healthy women. It is, as hooks (1990) suggests, a language these girls need to be able to speak, through their bodies, if they are to succeed in the culture. The same language or images they seek to create are the same images (language) that will continue their oppression. It is partially through fashion that they begin to judge themselves and each other, a requisite factor if this oppression is to continue, to determine whether they are or are not the ideal image. "Fashion In" was the power of the norm to construct the idealized image.

Alysa, Nicole, Dauntai, and Khalilah are learning to create desirable images that they associate with being normal. Normal is becoming a "perfected look" (i.e., healthy hair, the right clothes and shoes, the right body shape, looking feminine). The "suppose tos" spread throughout the girls' conversations in regard to images considered "normal" or "right" illuminate who can create these images naturally and who cannot. These "suppose tos" are an indication of how the girls were learning what the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1995) considers valuable. Unfortunately many of the images these girls called normal were false normalities.

False consciousness "contains a false belief to the effect that some social phenomenon is a natural phenomenon . . . [or that] the particular interest of some subgroup is the general interest of the group as a whole" (Geuss, 1981, p. 14). This form of consciousness serves to support, stabilize, or legitimize

certain kinds of social institutions or practices, many of which are unjust social practices, forms of domination, and oppression. If the powers that be are to maintain their control it becomes important for all girls to embody the normalized image created by those in power as "right" and carry out the storyline through images they try to create with their bodies. As educators and researchers it is our responsibility to help disrupt this unhealthy storyline.

The image of the perfect woman continues to be perpetuated, as do all its associated effects. The perfect woman does not exist but her image was becoming internalized within these four girls as they continued to strive to become her; a woman no one can ever become, for she is myth not a person.

"Fashion In" was the girls' way to communicate how the perpetuation of this oppressive myth operates within adolescent culture. It was the language they found to explain to an adult why growing up is so difficult. "Fashion In" reflects the images and stories of our cultural opinions and values of women as seen through the eyes of these four girls. Adolescence is the initiation process whereby girls may learn to desire and create, and encourage others to desire and create, the mythological image of the perfect woman. What I wonder is *why*. "The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. . . . They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects" (Friere, 1973, p. 55). Said differently, girls cannot enter the struggles of adolescence as "images" to later become healthy women.

Image was a powerful source of knowing for these four girls. Not only were these girls using images as an interpretive frame for learning about their worlds, their selves, and specifically their bodies, they were often accepting the visual images they saw at "face" value. If we hope girls will learn to desire and live healthy lives we need to help them become more aware of those cultural stories that are disabling and empowering to their health and well-being. Sparkes (1997) claims the ways in which people learn to view their bodies makes a big difference in how they treat their bodies and lead their lives. As educators we need to spend more time helping adolescent girls critically examine culture's "normal" stories and images of the body in hope of offering a wider view of who healthy women are and can become. Until girls can name what oppresses and prevents them from becoming healthy women they remain powerless. If girls can learn to identify the forms of their oppression and name preferred possibilities, they can begin to disrupt the forces of their own oppression.

Notes

1   All names are pseudonyms.
2   This portion of the study is not included as it is beyond the scope of this paper.
3   This paper is one subtheme from a larger project.

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Grade Inflation: A Leadership Opportunity for Schools of Education?

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Grade inflation pervades American schools from the K–12 level through the graduate level. The trend is particularly pronounced in the humanities fields and in departments, schools, and colleges of education (DSCEs). This problem presents a leadership opportunity for DSCEs to develop and implement a credible and meaningful grade-distribution system.

Grade inflation, which is a rise in academic grades not accompanied by a commensurate increase in academic achievement, is a widespread and increasing trend in the American education system at all levels. Education is one of the fields where the trend is particularly pronounced. The problem in terms of "puffery," or providing falsely favorable feedback, presents a leadership opportunity for departments, schools, and colleges of education to reverse the trend and achieve a more balanced, credible position.

ELEMENTARY/SECONDARY EDUCATION

A recent national survey suggested that public schools are suffering from the same inflation of grades that has beset undergraduate university programs. More specifically, in a national survey of entering college freshman, researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) found that grade inflation in high school had hit an all-time high. For example, 31.5% of these entering students in 1996 reported that their grade averages were A-minus or higher in high school, compared to 12.5% in 1969 (Weiss, 1997). Individually illustrating the corollary effects, record highs of 57.9% and 49% respectively assessed their academic ability as at least above average and expected that they will attain at least a "B" average in college ("This Year's Freshman," 1997).

Another recent national study revealed a significant increase in grades at the high school level during the past 5 years, without a concomitant rise in student academic achievement, as measured by the American College Testing (ACT) Assessment (Ziomek & Svec, 1997).