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# *Images of the Body from Popular Culture: Engaging Adolescent Girls in Critical Inquiry*

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**ABSTRACT** *The purpose of this paper is to highlight how I use images from teen magazines to engage girls in critical inquiry about the body. This process is about co-constructing bodily knowledge and reflecting critically on this knowledge. The analysis is broken into three main parts: (a) tapping girls' interests; (b) helping girls name how they experience their bodies; and (c) using images to critique dominant stories of the body. Within each of these sections, I will foreground the process by looking at the curricular tasks as well as the verbal engagement through which the girls and I negotiated the tasks together. The data are used to illustrate the pedagogical possibilities of engaging girls in critical inquiry on body. I conclude the paper by discussing the pedagogical possibilities for studying the body with adolescent girls that emerged and reflect critically on the struggles involved in the process of engaging girls in critical inquiry.*

When I think of perfect bodies I see a woman with slim, shaped legs, a flat stomach, slender arms, and plenty of shape (nice sized hips and breasts). (Brandi, written text)

Bodies that are in shape and nice and fit. (Jaylnn, written text)

It is saying buy and wear our clothes, they're the best. (Danielle, written text)

Gives people the idea that they should dress a certain way but that's not true. You should dress reasonably. Everything you wear doesn't have to be expensive. (Monique, written text)

Many aspects of physical culture, particularly those relating to bodies and represented through TV and magazines, are a continuously present resource, which provide adolescents with points of reference for themselves and orientations to each other. Young people are consumers of the products and commodities of popular physical culture.... Nevertheless ... young people do not use cultural resources uncritically. (Kirk & Tinning, 1994, p. 620)

*I am sitting surrounded with images of popular culture that adolescent girls negotiate daily and I am terrified. I have come to the point in my life where I refuse to participate in and perpetuate this type of cultural oppression of girls and women (i.e. I will no longer buy or read women's magazines). And yet I wonder how adults can help adolescent girls learn to critique these cultural icons (Oliver, 1999), and learn to name and resist the more subtle and harmful messages about the body that are imbedded through popular cultural images (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). I am keenly aware of the historical,*

*philosophical debilitating mind/body dualism that has created a space for our culture to disembody and objectify human beings, and specifically, women (Dewey, 1922, 1932). I understand the theoretical arguments that have filtered through our literature for years on the ways in which our bodies are used as a means of regulating our behaviors (Bordo, 1989; Foucault, 1977, 1985; Shilling, 1993; Sparkes, 1996, 1997; Wright, 2000). I am well aware of the feminist critiques of how our culture uses women's bodies to continue the oppression of girls and women (Bloom Munro, 1995), especially in terms of race (Collins, 1991, 1998; hooks, 1989, 1990, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Oliver Lalik, 2000), class (Collins, 1991; Oliver, 1999); gender (Bordo, 1989, 1997; Wolf, 1991; Oliver Lalik, in press), sexuality (Fine, 1993), age, and ability (Sparkes, 1997). I am in agreement with the cries from educators to offer adolescents opportunities to explore and critique the body in popular culture (Armour, 1999; Kirk Tinning, 1994; Kirk MacDonald, 1998; Oliver, 1999; Oliver Lalik, 2000, in press; Tinning Fitzclarence, 1992; Vertinsky, 1992). And still I am left wondering, when are we as a culture, and more specifically as a collective group of educators and scholars, going to admit to the devastation that we are creating and take active responsibility for supporting the kinds of change that might create more socially just and healthy environments in which adolescents, girls and boys, can grow up? I am inspired by the words of Maxine Greene (1995): 'Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed' (p. 22).*

My intent in this paper is to begin to trace what has become an ongoing inquiry into the use of image as a research method and a curricular technique aimed at helping adolescent girls name and critique the meanings of their bodies. Within this strand of my research I am particularly interested in using teen magazines as a research method with a pedagogical intent to (a) tap girls' interests; (b) help girls name their experiences of their bodies; and (c) help girls learn to critique dominant stories and images of the body. By looking at images within adolescent popular culture that girls find interesting and/or meaningful, I begin to explore why physical educators need to help girls learn to critique these images of the body and how I use teen magazines in the process of engaging adolescent girls in critical inquiry. I see this research as a continual process open to new ways of thinking and exploring what it means to use images of the body with girls. Thus, I include a discussion of some of the pedagogical possibilities that this type of curriculum research creates as well as some of the struggles I have encountered as my use of image with girls has evolved.

### **Engaging Girls in Critical Inquiry**

Although information is always better than silence, we need to think about how girls learn about their bodies and whose interests inform the presentation of this critical information. (Brumberg, 1997, p. 53)

There is not a day that goes by that girls are not bombarded with messages about their bodies. 'Buy this product and your skin will appear smooth'; 'Wear this dress and others will notice you'; 'Take this pill and you will magically shed the pounds'; 'Try this gel and your hair will be straight and beautiful'. Adolescence is a time when girls become particularly interested in and often preoccupied with their bodies and the bodies of others (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Oliver & Lalik, 2000; Pipher, 1994). The glossy teen magazines that girls look at and read depict images of girls deemed socially beautiful and desirable, with few, if any bodily flaws. Yet the images we find in these magazines are remarkably similar. It is as if through popular physical culture we are mass producing

girls' bodies with the hope of mass-producing girls sense of selves. Sparkes (1997) claims that what we think we are and who we hope we can become is shaped in part, by the dominant cultural stories that are available to us. When the stories about girls' bodies are narrow in scope, often portraying girls as objects of male desire (Berger, 1972; Bordo, 1997; Wolf, 1991), we limit girls' life possibilities, and jeopardize girls' health.

We have shown consistently how women's sense of self becomes brutalized when the female body is objectified and demeaned in society (Bordo, 1997; Collins, 1991; hooks, 1989, 1995). Feminist writers have documented the crucial role that the body plays in the reciprocal relationship between women's private and public identities. Given that we live in a culture that uses images of beauty as a means of controlling women, the body becomes a site for political struggles. Wolf writes, 'The ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable' (1991, pp. 10–11). For women of color this beauty myth is doubly dangerous for the 'universal standard of beauty' sustains white supremacist images as the ideal (Hooks, 1995). As women begin to internalize the social meanings that are publicly attached to the body their private feelings of self-worth are jeopardized. Even for those of us who consciously strive to reject the oppressive ways women are represented in culture, we still live with embodied feelings of doubt (Oliver & Lalik, 2000).

Given the ways in which our culture uses women's bodies to perpetuate the oppression of women we are not surprised at how girls learn to become so concerned with the way their bodies look (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). While we cannot, and should not, assume that girls experience their bodies the same ways in which women do, we do know that the social oppression of girls and women stems, in part, from the visual world constructed in our culture. The images presented on the web, television, ads, MTV, videos and teen magazines are part of adolescents' visual worlds (Kirk, 1999; Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Lankshear & Knobel, 2001; Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992). This is a stimulating world in which slim and muscular bodies with white features of characteristics are constructed as the dominant icon of desirability. Girls' bodies, as portrayed through popular cultural images, become the norms in which girls learn to evaluate themselves and others (Oliver, 1999). Both the messages girls receive about their bodies through popular cultural images, as well as the ways in which girls learn to think and feel about their bodies, have implications for physical educators (Armour, 1999; Kirk, 1999; Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Oliver & Lalik, 2001).

Cries from researchers in physical education to engage students in critically studying their experiences of their bodies are becoming louder and more sustained (Armour, 1999; Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Kirk & Claxton, 2000; Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Oliver & Lalik, 2001; Wright, 1996). Armour (1999) claims that physical educators could benefit from establishing more of a body focus in physical education curriculum. Similarly, Vertinsky (1992) claims that physical educators need to pay more attention to how adolescent girls' cultural perspectives contribute to how they construct their sense of self. She believes that creating opportunities for girls to talk about their bodies, and analyze social and cultural issues related to health, is one step toward helping girls learn to interpret empowering messages and resist destructive ones. Further, if we hope for girls to develop into healthy women, we need to help them learn to critique images of the body within popular culture (Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2001).

While these are noteworthy ideas, it no longer seems sufficient to merely offer such suggestions without also critically studying such possibilities with actual girls (Oliver &

Lalik, 2000). Much of our literature on the body remains either abstract or theoretical (Armour, 1999; Sparkes, 1997; Vertinsky, 1992). We have few data-based examples that illuminate what critically studying the body with adolescents might look and sound like (Kirk & Claxton, 2000; Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Lalik, 2000, 2001). Much more research in this area is needed if we hope to begin to develop curricula that may help girls name and critique their experiences of their bodies in ways that might be helpful to their health and well-being. What follows is one study that explores ways of working with adolescent girls with intent to help them name and critique images of the body in popular culture.

One of my hopes in using images from popular culture in this research was to begin to understand how adolescent girls were interpreting some of the dominant stories of the body available to them. It was my hope that by using teen magazines with the girls that they might begin to name and recognize some of their unassumed beliefs about the body. I wanted to work with them to help them find a language with which they could communicate these beliefs. And eventually I began wanting to help them critically reflect on their beliefs about women's bodies by focusing on how their beliefs, and the beliefs of others, were helpful and/or harmful to girls' health and well-being. This project reflects, in part, the perspective of activist research as described by Michelle Fine (1992):

Activist research projects seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual and political theory and change. Researchers critique what seems natural, spin images of what's possible, and engage in questions of how to move from here to there ... If there is no other task that feminist activist researchers can accomplish, we must provoke a deep curiosity about, indeed an intolerance for, that which is described as inevitable, immutable, and natural. (pp. 222–223).

If we hope to push socially critical pedagogy forward through educational research, such activist research projects seem worthy of further pursuit. That is, we need examples in our professional literature that bring social, critical, and feminist theories into the classrooms with real students so that we might begin to better understand how these theories can and cannot influence pedagogical practices and curricula designed with and for adolescents.

### *Setting/Participants*

This paper draws on insights from multiple studies with adolescent girls, and data from one particular study. The data from which I draw on come from a study that took place in a predominately African American middle school in the south-east of the United States. Tornado Middle School is an all-8th-grade school as a result of trying to increase integration in the city schools. The logic was that if all students in the same grade were required to attend the same school the schools would become more integrated. Despite attempts, the school caters to approximately 70% African American students and 30% European Americans and any other race.

Within this study I worked with two groups of girls (four girls per group) during their regularly scheduled physical education classes. All eight girls had parent permission and were selected because of their interest and willingness to commit to working with me every Friday for the 1998–1999 school year. Fridays were designated for either making up work or choice day. While several other girls indicated an interest in working with me they were not ready to commit giving up their choice day for the entire year.

The girls and I met in a private classroom one day per week for 60 minutes throughout the 1998–1999 academic school year. The goal was to engage in a critical study of the body to supplement the physical education curriculum that the girls currently were receiving. The first group consisted of two African American girls from working-class families, Monique and Janae. Both girls identified as ‘dark skinned.’ The other two girls were European American, one from a middle-class family, Kristi, and one from a working-class family, Danielle. The second group consisted of four African American girls, two of whom identified as ‘light skinned,’ Brandi and Jaylenn, and two who identified as ‘dark skinned,’ Alexandria and Destiny. All four girls came from various levels of working-class families. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms selected by the girls.

My biography differs from the majority of girls I worked with. I am a 33-year-old white woman who was raised in an upper–middle-class family in Southern California. I currently teach at a research institute in the south-east of the United States. My abilities to understand these girls’ experiences are limited to my outsider stance (hooks, 1995). Given my different social and cultural positioning I strive to keep the girls’ voices in the forefront so that others, with their multiple subjectivities, can interpret the girls’ voices in their own ways (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1995).

### *Ways of Working with Girls*

While the purpose of this paper is to highlight the ways in which I use teen magazines to help girl critique the body in popular culture it is important to the broader context to understand the other forms of inquiry I was engaging the girls in throughout the course of this research project.<sup>1</sup> Even though I worked with two groups of girls and there were some differences between what I did with one group as compared to the other, the overall forms of inquiry were similar. I describe the inquiry process (what some would call data collection) rather than the specifics of each group in this particular paper.

I began this study by inviting the girls to do personal biographies whereby I asked them a series of questions relating to their home life, their personal interests, their school involvement’s and more. In addition I asked the girls to create personal maps of where they spent their time and with whom they spent their time (Oliver & Lalik, 2000).

The next task I asked the girls to do was what I call a magazine exploration (Oliver, 1999). This method will be described in much more detail throughout the remainder of the paper. My hope was to tap and sustain girls’ interests by using one medium from popular culture that emphasizes girls’ bodies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2001).

At the same time we were engaging in the magazine exploration I gave each girl a journal and asked her to document the times she noticed her body. I encouraged the girls to write about what they were doing when they noticed their bodies, what they were thinking and what they were feeling. Further I asked them to write about things that made them feel good and bad about their bodies and explain why. As the girls wrote in their journals I would respond by asking them to elaborate or explain a topic they had written on in more detail or asking them questions that would help them to think more critically about some of the things they were saying. Journal topics also emerged from group discussions.

In addition to the magazine exploration and journal writing I gave each girl two disposable cameras. First I asked the girls to take pictures of things that made them feel good and/or bad about their bodies. In the second photo task I asked them to take pictures of things that sent messages to girls about their bodies. My hope with the photo

analysis was to create a space to explore issues of the body that weren't confined to images created by those who hold social and cultural power (Delpit, 1995).

Finally, I invited each group of girls to engage in a student/researcher designed inquiry project that centered on some aspect that implicates girls' bodies. The first group studied 'girls' perceptions of what attracts attention'. This topic emerged from the magazine exploration. The second group of girls studied 'girls' perceptions of the "Beauty Walk" '. Within the inquiry projects, as a group, we designed surveys to get at other girls' perceptions of one of the two topics. The purpose behind studying 'other girls' perceptions' came out of previous research where we found girls were more willing and able to critique the status quo, or dominant discourses, when talking about 'other girls' (Oliver & Lalik, 2000, 2001). As a group, we pilot tested the surveys on 10 girls in their physical education class to see if the questions made sense to anyone beside ourselves. After minor survey revisions we surveyed two different physical education classes. The girls then analyzed the surveys looking for common themes and areas of contradiction. Based on our findings we discussed how girls' perceptions could be helpful and harmful to girls' well-being. We tried to imagine ways of thinking that would be more helpful to girls' sense of self.

The major tasks that we engaged in created spaces (Obidah, 1998) for group discussion, reflection, and critical analyses that took us across the year we spent together. All group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. What follows is a more detailed description of how I use images from teen magazines as means of engaging girls in critical inquiry about the body. This process is about co-constructing bodily knowledge and reflecting critically on this knowledge. The analysis is broken into three main parts: (a) tapping girls' interests; (b) helping girls name how they experience their bodies; and (c) using images to critique dominant stories of the body. Within each of these sections, I will foreground the process by looking at the curricular tasks as well as the verbal engagement through which the girls and I negotiated the tasks together. The data are used to illustrate the pedagogical possibilities of engaging girls in critical inquiry on body. I conclude the paper by discussing the pedagogical possibilities for studying the body with adolescent girls that emerged and reflect critically on the struggles involved in the process of engaging girls in critical inquiry.

### **Using Images from Popular Culture**

#### *Tapping Girls' Interests*

Go through the magazines and cut out pictures and/or text that are of interest to you and categorize your pictures/text any way you want. (task sheet, 25 September 1998)<sup>2</sup>

Cute clothes/shoes: When I see cute clothes, I think I want that and the same with shoes. (Brandi, written text that accompanied a Dillard's Department Store advertisement for Tommy Hillfigure back-to-school-clothes)

When I first began using images in my research I did so with two main purposes in mind. First, I wanted to tap and sustain girls' interests, and believed that by using magazines from adolescent popular culture I might be able to better understand some of the things girls found meaningful. Dewey (1916) claims that we are educated by and through our interests. Further, Lankshear and Knobel (2001) claim that within an attention economy if we hope to capture and sustain adolescents' interests we need to attend to those areas

that currently attract their attention. Issues of the body are of significant importance to many girls; hence a topic that attracts their attention (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Oliver & Lalik, 2000; Pipher, 1994). Second, I wanted to use images from teen magazines as a research technique aimed at understanding how adolescent girls constructed the meanings of their bodies. I agree with Maxine Greene (1995) and Elliot Eisner (1993) that multiple forms of representation create spaces for multiple meanings to emerge, thus using images from popular culture seemed appropriate for several reasons. I thought that magazine images could help girls reveal meanings about the body that were difficult to understand through written or verbal discourses. Further, 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, television, and the internet (Berger, 1972; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Lankshear & Knobel, 2001; Pipher, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Understanding the images girls looked at and found interesting seemed important to understanding how they were constructing the meanings of their bodies (Oliver, 1999).

After my initial trial of using teen magazines I learned that image was a very powerful source of information for the girls I worked with, particularly in making judgements about their self-worth and that of others. I also learned that using images was helpful in understanding some of the girls' experiences of their bodies (Oliver, 1999). It was from the knowledge I gained when I first used images with girls that I began wondering how I could use images more purposefully.

While inviting girls to 'cut out pictures that were interest to them and categorize their pictures' was a good place to begin for it tapped their interests, it no longer seemed sufficient for understanding some of the more intricate ways girls were constructing the meanings of their bodies. In the study that I draw on for this paper, I wanted to extend the magazine exploration to include a section that asked girls to explore how the images they found interesting related to the body, as well as how they made them feel specifically about their own bodies. I wanted to understand which images made them feel good about their bodies, which ones made them feel bad about their bodies, and why. I thought that this might be useful information for physical educators. That is, if as physical educators we could better understand some of the aspects of physical culture (Kirk, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2001; Knobel & Lankshear, 2001) that influence how girls think and feel about their bodies maybe we could find more responsive ways of creating curriculum that takes into consideration girls' experiences of their bodies. This is important because often educators focus on issues of the body that deal with physical activity and sport, things that we believe *ought* to be important to adolescents, rather than taking seriously bodily experiences that they think are important. In an attention economy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2001), using girls' interests (i.e. the body) to gain and sustain their attention might be a necessary starting point for helping them learn to value other important areas of physical education such as engagement in lifelong physical activity.

#### *Helping Girls Name How They Experience their Bodies*

Tapping girls' interests with images from popular culture was the starting place. From there my goal was to use these images as a means to help girls name their experiences of their bodies. That is, the images the girls selected created spaces for conversations about how girls' bodies are portrayed in culture and how these representations influence how these girls were learning to think and feel about their bodies. Part of the process dealt with finding ways to engage the girls in reflective and critical conversations about



the images they had selected. The tasks given initially to the girls are an important part of this analysis. However, what is crucial to understanding how the girls responded to these tasks, and the artifacts they created, is seen more clearly through the verbal engagement that took place as the girls and I negotiated the tasks together. What became central in these negotiations were the types of questioning required on my part to help the girls name their experiences of their bodies.

#### *Describing Tasks/Questions*

After the girls had selected images they found interesting and categorized their images I asked the girls to write about what each category meant. On a task sheet I wrote 'Explain what each category means and why each picture is in that particular category' (task sheet, 9 October 1998). The task sheet was an insufficient way to explain what I wanted the girls to do. In addition, I had to explain verbally more than once what I meant.

*Researcher:* On a piece of paper I want you to describe to me what these categories mean. So if you have a category, food, describe what that means to you ... And do it for all the categories ... Then we're going to come up with a group description, and then I'm going to have you explain to me why the pictures are in the particular categories.

*Monique:* Okay, do we have to write something about each category?

*Researcher:* Yeah, you have to write what they mean. Be descriptive. Describe what a food category would be. Describe what it has to do with your body. Or what it has to do with how it makes you think or feel about your body.

So for example, Destiny selected an image of an African American woman in a short top and tight shorts that covered three-fourths of her bottom, smiling at the camera while using a leg curl weight machine to use as her prompt for the category 'perfect bodies'. She wrote 'Perfect bodies—perfect bodies are bodies that are thin and thick, well a little mixture of both, not too fat, not too skinny (medium sized breasts, hips, legs, and thighs)'.

The purpose for asking the girls to describe their categories in writing before we moved on to the group discussion and description stemmed from previous experience whereby we have learned that adolescent girls sometimes have an easier time discussing what they are talking about when they have had an opportunity to write first (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). After the girls had an opportunity to describe what the categories meant to them we moved into the group discussion. Once we began discussing the categories in the small group my form of questioning shifted from purely descriptive to more of a connective type of questioning. That is, I found I needed to begin by asking questions that elicited description and then to help the girls elaborate I needed to ask questions that helped them connect what they were saying explicitly to the body.

#### *Connective Tasks/Questions*

In order to help the girls make explicit how their categories related to the body I asked them to tell me 'what their categories had to do with the body' and how the pictures they selected 'made them think and feel about their bodies'. Thus, the majority of questions I asked during our conversations centered on helping them make explicit exactly how these categories and images related to the body, or how they made them think and feel about their own bodies. I will use two examples of how the girls and I discussed the

categories to illustrate how I would use both descriptive and connective questions to help the girls name their experiences of the body. This is important insofar as helping girls learn to not only name but also critique how girls' bodies are portrayed in culture requires very active participation on the part of the teacher. Part of this active participation comes in the form of strategic questioning aimed at helping the girls elaborate what they are saying (Oliver & Lalik, 2000).

*'Main Trends/Fashion Statements'*

*Researcher:* Alright, what shall we do next ... fitness, health care, main trends/fashion statements, hair, or hygiene?

*Janae:* Do main trends.

*Researcher:* Main trends? Okay, describe what this category means.

*Janae:* It means trends that are well known and are worn at like that certain period of time. Everybody wears at the same time.

*Researcher:* [Taking images in my hand of white girls in 3-4 inch heels and short tight skirts and tops.] I mean describe to me why ... why are these people in main trends or fashion statements?

*Kristi:* Because of their cute outfits.

*Researcher:* Cute outfits?

*Janae:* They're trendy.

*Monique:* I like those shoes.

*Janae:* Cause like they're dressed according to like the trend everybody wears now.

While the girls were able to describe the category, I was interested to know how they thought this related to the body, so I asked a connective question, one intended to help them explicitly relate this category to the body.

*Researcher:* How does main trends have anything to do with the way you would think or feel about your body?

*Janae:* Make you feel like you standing out.

*Researcher:* Okay, so main trends would make you stand out?

*Janae:* Un-huh.

Janae was able to describe what the category meant to her, that is, clothes that are 'well known' and was able to say why this category related to the body, 'make you feel like you are standing out'. However, I was also interested in seeing whether the girls could verbalize how this category made them feel about their own bodies. I tried again to redirect the question so that it focused on how they thought about their own body.

*Researcher:* Okay, how else would it make you think or feel about your body?

*Kristi:* Certain clothes make you feel smaller and certain make you feel bigger.

*Janae:* Yeah.

*Researcher:* Certain ones make you feel smaller and bigger ... Explain that.

*Kristi:* Like if you're wearing like a really tight shirt you feel like fat for some reason.

*Researcher:* What kind of clothes don't make you feel fat?

*Kristi:* Some types can make you feel fat and some can't.

*Researcher:* Okay, so sometimes tight clothes can make you feel fat, sometimes?

*Kristi:* It just depends on what it is. A T-shirt you can't really feel fat in. I mean a T-shirt is just like baggy.

Again, I tried to find ways of questioning that would help the girls further elaborate what they were trying to explain. This next time Janae was able to name specifically why clothes can 'make you feel fat'.

*Researcher:* Why is it that you think clothes will make you feel fat, though? I mean your body isn't going to change sizes depending on what you put on.

*Janae:* The way they look on you.

It was through a series of questions that the girls were able to get to a point where they could actually name why something was a particular way (i.e. clothes can make you 'feel fat' because of 'the way they look on you'). However, had they been limited only to the task at hand and not had an adult who could help them elaborate by way of questioning, their responses would most likely be less elaborate. Greene (1995) reminds us of the importance of being able to name the meanings of our experiences if we hope to make intelligent choices. In this case it is important to help girls elaborate so that they can critically reflect on what it is they are saying in relation to what it is they believe. Even if what they believe about girls' bodies appears to adults to be 'unhealthy' or 'oppressive' we have to be able to get at what they think before we can help them learn to question their beliefs (Gee, 2001). This type of questioning is not intended to get girls to say what you want them to say but rather to help them articulate and elaborate their thoughts so that as educators we can begin to move them into critical spaces (Dillon & Moje, 1998).

#### *'Magazine Quizzes/Information'*

Magazine Quizzes/Information—Information and quizzes that interest us. Good information about how we can get boys, weight, hair, clothes, etc. (Alexandria, written description about an article that read: 'Top ten secrets to increasing your popularity', *YM*, September 1998, p. 90).

*Researcher:* What about magazine quizzes? ... Explain this category to me. What's this have to do with your body?

*Alexandria:* They could tell you about anything.

*Brandi:* Yeah, like do you have too big hips.

*Researcher:* Do you believe what they say? ... Like, let's say they had an article in here about what too big hips are, would you believe?

*Alexandria:* No, cause that's their opinion ... Information, now, that might be helpful.

We need to help girls learn that any form of information is laced with values, and that just because something is presented as 'fact' does not mean that they should take this information as 'the truth' and not question its validity (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In other words, we need to help girls learn how to criticize texts and images supposable 'facts' about their bodies. This is particularly important for physical educators who hope to

guide young people in the process of learning to live healthy lives because our culture bombards young people with body messages. Things such as quick-fix remedies for losing weight or increasing muscle mass, to stereotypical girl-and-boy-appropriate physical activity. Many of these body messages come in the form of 'information'.

*Researcher:* Oh, here's something [I pick up the picture/article] ... it says 'Truth: Popular girls are expected to look perfect' (*TM*, September 1998). Do you think that's true, that popular girls are expected to look perfect?

*Brandi:* Not necessarily.

*Alexandria:* Not be perfect.

*Jaylmi:* Most of them ... I don't pay any attention.

*Brandi:* I would pay more attention than I would think I did.

*Researcher:* Why do you think that is?

*Brandi:* I don't know. See, when I'm in band, I pay a lot of attention to, guess who? ... See, I pay a lot of attention to Janae because she's my size but she's cute for somebody ... to be somebody about my size.

*Alexandria:* [says to Brandi] Tell her boys like her ... talk to her.

*Brandi:* We're like the same size and I wonder why they [boys] talk to her instead of me sometimes ...

*Destiny:* Cause she dresses and gets her hair done.

*Researcher:* Do you think that boys only look at you because of the size of your body?

*Brandi:* What?

*Researcher:* I said, do you think boys only look at you and are interested in you because of the size of your body?

*Jaylmi:* Most of them.

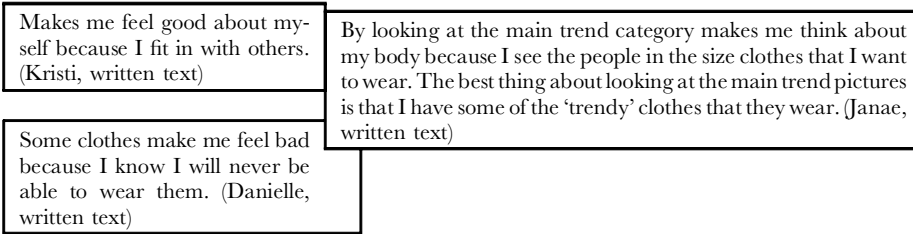
*Brandi:* Size, face, and body.

This type of conversation illuminates why girls need to have the opportunity to learn in school that they are more than 'just the size of their bodies'. And while these girls know this in some ways, their language in this particular conversation reveals the power of the dominant representation of women. That is, that women are seen as 'bodies first and people second' (Bloom & Munro, 1995, p. 109). We can also see why it is so important that physical educators be sensitive that we do not unintentionally perpetuate this oppressive cultural narrative by trying to motivate girls to be active so that they will *look better*.

### *Naming the Personal*

Building from the images that the girls selected based on their personal interests I wanted to extend this magazine task to look closely at how the pictures they selected made them think or feel about their own bodies. While some of my connective questioning included this I wanted to try one last way of helping the girls name their experiences of their bodies. On a task sheet I wrote, 'Individually, go through the magazines and/or the pictures that you already cut out and categorize the pictures that make you feel good about your body and make you feel bad about your body. On an index card write why

**'Main Trend/Fashion Statement'**



**'Fitness Health'**

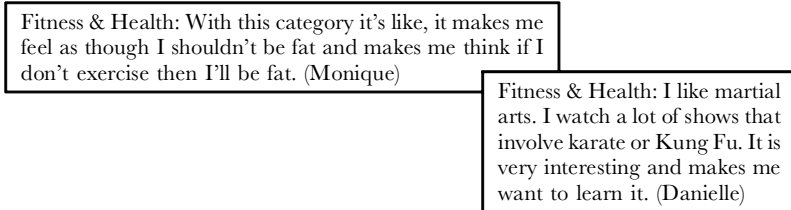


FIG. 1.

each picture makes you feel good/bad about your body being as descriptive as possible' (task sheet, 23 October 1998).

My hope was to use the cultural images they selected to elicit emotional responses. Thus, I encouraged the girls to describe through writing their responses to the images. The images provided a tangible object with which to reflect on, respond to, and critique. After the girls finished creating categories for their piles of images I asked them to do the following:

Okay, what I want you to do is to go through and pick out five categories ... whichever ones you want. It doesn't matter ... You're going to pick out five topics of categories and describe how each of the categories makes you think and feel about your body. For example, 'fitness and health'. If I were going to write on fitness and health I would write about how this category makes me think or feel about my body. So pick out five of these categories ... and if you want to write about more, then that's fine. But write about how they make you think or feel about your body, being as descriptive as you can.

'Fitness & health', 'main trends & fashion statements', 'cute hairstyles', 'sayings', and 'magazine quizzes/information' were a few of the categories the girls selected. It was very common to read things like: 'Hair styles make me feel lovely and it makes me feel good about my body' (Danielle), or 'Hair makes me look good like I'm going out into public. It makes me feel good because I attract attention to the people around me' (Janae), and 'The woman with the pretty hair is how I want my hair styled' (Monique). Looking at the images of African American women these girls selected it was clearly noticeable that most of the images depict Black women with straight hair. This created a space for us to discuss issues of race and racism. No longer oblivious to this subtle form of white supremacy I asked Destiny, Brandi, Alexandria, and Jaylenn, 'Why do you think most of the Black women have straight hair?' I wondered whether these girls even

questioned this—they certainly had not in our group discussions. I selected one of the pictures of an African American woman with kinky shoulder length hair that the girls had cut out to represent ‘perfect bodies’ and asked them to comment on her hair. Brandi responded, ‘It looks nappy. I don’t know if it is, but it looks like it’.

‘I think it looks natural’, I said, only to hear from Brandi, ‘It don’t look right’. Brandi, Alexandria, Destiny, and Jaylenn went on to discuss how straight hair ‘looked better’, ‘was neater’, ‘classier’ and more ‘sophisticated’. Alexandria claimed that if you do not straighten your hair, like this person, ‘it look like you don’t care for you body ... like you just don’t put the time out for yourself. You want to look good but you won’t do you hair or anything’. One of the more frustrating aspects of this type of work was to watch the girls reject images of women who did not conform to racist standards of beauty (hooks, 1995). The final section looks at an attempt to use magazine images to help girls critique popular cultural images of the body.

#### *Using Images to Critique Dominant Stories of the Body*

*Go through the magazines and cut out pictures and/or text that send messages to girls about their bodies. Categorize your pictures and/or text any way you want. Write descriptions about each category. What messages are being sent to girls about their bodies? How are these messages helpful and/or harmful to girls? (task sheet, 19 March 1999)*

In this next magazine exploration I look at my attempt to help girls name and critique some of the dominant stories of the body in popular culture. My hope was to begin to help girls critique how the cultural images of girls’ bodies were helpful and/or harmful to girls’ health and well-being. As Greene (1995) claims, it is only after we can name the meanings of our experiences that we can become more critical and imagine alternative or better possibilities. The girls were making small strides toward identifying what they were learning, both directly and indirectly, about their bodies through the images and text in teen magazines. I thought that if they could begin to name specifically what was being implied girls should wear, or look like, or act like, or be like, then maybe a space would open that they could begin publicly challenging some of the more life-limiting messages (Gee, 2001). This part of the critical inquiry process was the most difficult. In many ways I was asking these girls to go against traditional cultural values and norms. Any time you ask others to go against the ‘norm’ or the status quo, you create certain tensions (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

#### *Creating Critical Spaces*

I began by giving each girl a copy of the task sheet (see above) and followed it with this explanation:

*Researcher:* What I want you to go first is to go through the magazines and to cut out pictures or text, text meaning advertisements and the words, or titles or whatever. Cut out pictures or text that sends messages to girls about their bodies ... So anything you see that tells girls something about their bodies.

*Kristi:* Like something they need?

*Researcher:* Anything. I mean just anything that you see in here that is umm, a message, whether it is a direct message or a subtle message to girls about their bodies. Whether it be what they should do, what they need, what they should look like, any of that ... And then as a group we are going to categorize the pictures.

Monique, Danielle, Janae, and Kristi claim that girls receive messages about their bodies from a variety of sources. The categories the girls created to explain the messages that girls receive about their bodies through images in popular culture included: 'fitness'; 'hair/hair products'; 'style'; 'body products'; 'quizzes'; and 'people'. It took a while for the girls to figure out what categories to create for their pictures. Once the categories were created I gave them a piece of paper and asked:

*Researcher:* Alright, this is what you are going to do next. And you each get to do this on your own ... I want you to write a description for each category ... What messages are being sent to girls about their bodies? ... I want you to look through the pictures and the text that you have cut out for these. I want you to write a description about the category and what messages are being sent to girls about their bodies ... You're going to have to critically analyze what messages are being sent to girls about their bodies because of these pictures and the texts. This is going to require thought ... What you probably need to do is to spend a little bit of time looking at some of these pictures and talking about each one of them. Or pick out three and talk about them.

*Monique:* What do we have to write on?

*Researcher:* Okay, I want you to pick out your favorite picture from each category.

*Kristi:* Just one picture okay?

*Researcher:* Yeah, make sure you write on the picture you pick out ... Once everybody has their picture I'll tell you what we're gonna do. I want you to think about why you liked this picture and what messages are being sent to girls about their body ... So go through and figure out, actually write down ... what messages are being sent to girls about their bodies from your picture. Label your pictures on your sheet so you can remember the picture.

*Trying again.* The effort on my part to reword and re-explain what I wanted the girls to do was extensive. I simply did not have the language I needed to connect with them, to help them think more critically about what they were learning through the images they found interesting. This section illuminates two of the many attempts it took to get the girls to make very small steps toward critiquing the images.

After the girls had been working awhile Kristi showed me what she had written. She was holding a picture of a young woman in a bikini and her accompanying text read, 'I like the bathing suit she is wearing'. I tried to get Kristi to tell me what messages are being sent to girls about their bodies from this particular picture so I asked:

*Researcher:* Right, but see this is your opinion on why you like the picture. Now tell me what the picture says to you about ... I mean, what message is being sent to you from this picture?

*Kristi:* But that is what it's saying to me ... That I like the bathing suit she's wearing.

*Researcher:* When you look at this picture, when you look at the bathing suit picture, what messages are being sent to you about your body? Just looking at this picture.

*Kristi:* I want to write this down cause I want to remember some of this stuff.

*Researcher:* Ahh.

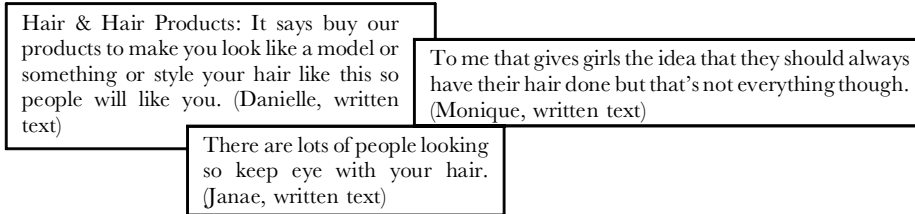


FIG. 2.

*Kristi:* Okay, that she's smaller than me.

*Researcher:* So what's the message?

*Kristi:* I cut it out just cause I liked the bathing suit.

Kristi was able to name why she liked the picture (i.e. the girl was smaller than she was), but was unable to name the possible messages being sent to girls about their bodies (e.g. that this is an appropriate size for a girl, or girls need to look like this if they want to wear this swimsuit). Not ready to give up trying, I moved to a new strategy. I thought we would talk about the messages as a group.

*Researcher:* Now what I want you to do is to pick out one picture ... oh um I'm don't know ... Pick out any picture you want just one of your pile ... I want you to explain to everybody what the category says to girls or what message is being sent to you about your body.

*Janae:* Are you asking me? ... [She picks up a picture from her hair category.] I said it's important to keep up with your hair.

*Monique:* To keep it decent.

*Researcher:* Okay, so the message is it's important to keep your hair looking decent? Alright. What's decent? Does this show what decent is?

*Janae:* Yeah.

*Researcher:* Now let me ask you, what if I did not have naturally straight hair, what message is that telling me?

*Kristi:* Then you get to pull out a curling iron every morning.

*Janae:* That you should have neat hair.

*Researcher:* Okay, but tell me, her hair is straight. What if I didn't have straight hair?

*Janae:* If it was curly?

*Researcher:* Okay, so my hair doesn't have to look like this to look decent?

*Janae:* Uh-uh. You need to just look good.

The girls continued to struggle through the task of describing what messages were being sent to girls about their bodies. The above examples were typical of the types of spaces I tried to create to help the girls think beyond mere description or why they selected the images.



**‘Hair Hair Products’**

You need to purkify (make yourself pretty or purkey) ... It makes you feel good or pretty. It is harmful as it might get stuck in your hair. (Danielle, written text)

Grooming your hair is a 1 thing. Too much combing the hair is dangerous. Products help keep your hair healthy. You have to be careful what kind of products you use. (Janae, written text)

Helpful—It makes you feel good about yourself when your hair is done.  
Bad—when the image goes to your head and if your hair comes out from all the chemicals. (Monique, written text)

**‘Fitness’**

Fitness: Taking care of your body is a precious part of you so keep it well. Exercise strengthens anyone’s mind. (Janae, written text)

Fitness: It says you should keep in shape to make you look and feel good. It is helpful to keep healthy to have a long life and harmful as you might work yourself too hard. (Danielle, written text)

Fitness: I think that fitness is telling girls that they should keep their body up. Everyone can’t run as fast as the other but you should keep in shape for a good healthy life. It is helpful my moving you to keep in shape and harmful by the image they show you of someone and you may diet all year and never be that size and it could make you feel bad about yourself (Monique, written text)

FIG. 3.

*Seeking Further Critique*

The final aspect of this magazine task involved the girls identifying how their images could be both helpful and harmful to girls. As with trying to help them name their experiences, I needed to ask questions that encouraged the girls to think critically about their images and the messages imbedded within the images. I provide examples of both the girls’ written text and one of our conversations about the text to show what their critique actually looked and sounded like. I use the ‘Hair/hair products’ category as these girls talked consistently about hair and it was one of their biggest categories with respect to the number of images.

*Researcher:* Now, tell me why the categories are helpful and/or harmful to girls. This is the critical part. I want you to critique the pictures and critique the messages as helpful and harmful, actually both, not either/or, but they could be helpful and they can be harmful. Tell me how.

*Kristi:* That thing means the same as that one, they make you look better.

*Researcher:* Okay, then how can it be harmful?

*Kristi:* You could die.

*Researcher:* Okay, um, but no, I want you to tell me helpful and harmful.

*Kristi:* How would hair products make you feel harmful?

*Researcher:* Show me your hair product. Is this your hair product? ... How is it helpful? How could it be harmful?

*Kristi:* You could choke on it.

*Researcher:* No, I mean in terms of the messages, are these things that girls should wear right? Here are things to make you look pretty. How is that harmful?

*Kristi:* If you got to have it so bad. I don't know.

*Researcher:* Why should you need things to look pretty? Why couldn't you just look pretty the way you are with no things? ... Do you think some people might look at this and say, well if I don't have this I'm not gonna be in?

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this paper was to look at how images from popular culture can be used to engage adolescent girls in critical inquiry about the body. Images from teen magazines can be used to: (a) tap girls' interests; (b) help girls name how they experience their bodies; and (c) help girls learn to critique dominant stories of the body. Within this study there were both pedagogical possibilities that emerged as well as struggles involved with engaging girls in critical inquiry.

#### *Pedagogical Possibilities*

If, as Armour (1999) argues, body-work is the primary rationale for physical education's place in the school curriculum, then it seems essential that, as physical educators, we should pay close attention to the kinds of body-work that we foster and the forms of embodiment we produce. (Wright, 2000)

The kind of body work that using images from adolescent popular culture fosters is that it creates a number of possibilities to engage girls in critical dialogues about issues surrounding their bodies that they find relevant to their lives. This is important insofar as ways girls learn to think and feel about their bodies shapes, in part, how they learn to think about themselves (Sparkes, 1997). Obidah (1998) talks about the importance of schools acknowledging students' literacy currency. She writes,

Literate currency exemplifies the theoretical lenses through which adolescents assess the rest of the world as it relates to themselves. Awareness of students' literate currency may lead to teachers making space for it in the process of everyday schooling, and thus strengthening the potential for adolescents' engagement. (p. 56)

How girls experience their bodies and how these experiences shape the ways they engage in schooling practices can be seen as a form of literacy currency. That is, girls are bringing to physical education their experiences of their bodies and these experiences influence how they will interpret physical education. If we fail as educators and scholars to take seriously the ways in which girls' bodies shape their perceptions of their schooling experiences we miss opportunities to help girls learn to live healthy lives.

One of the pedagogical possibilities that emerged from using images from popular culture to engage girls in critical inquiry was that it provided spaces for these girls to bring up topics that *they* connected with their experiences of their bodies. Obidah (1998) defines 'making space' to mean 'allowing students' uncompromised voices to enter (critique, query, challenge) and alter conceptions of school knowledge "taught" to them' (p. 56). By critiquing images in teen magazines, issues such as race and racism, consumerism, gender stereotyping, sexuality, and teen-age pregnancy all emerged as body-related topics and later became the springboard for critical discussion, reflection, and journal writing.<sup>3</sup>

For example, Alexandria was busy writing about one of the pictures she had selected and looked up and said, 'I have a concept I would like to talk about'. She went on to explain that, 'some girls at our school are pregnant'. The group began discussing how they were curious to know what it 'felt like to be pregnant' and how important it was to have their 'mothers' to talk with because 'they don't talk about it [teenage pregnancy] at school'. Brandi mentioned that when they were in 5th grade they saw a film but that 'then most people didn't have questions and everyone was embarrassed to ask questions'. She continued by saying, 'Now everybody got all these questions and there ain't nobody to ask'. Questions they wanted answered included things such as, 'How to prevent AIDS?'; 'How to keep myself out of those ["when you know you're going to be like forced into it"] kinds of situations'; 'What kind of people to watch out for. When to make an exit ... How to make an exit. How to take care of a baby. Know where to turn if you get pregnant'.

One of the things that we as physical educators ought to take seriously are the issues girls connect to their bodies. These experiences can then become a place from which we might create curriculum that is more responsive to girls' needs (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Within this particular study using images from popular culture provided a space for these girls to bring up topics that they thought were important. We as educators have to ask ourselves, will we listen to what *they* think is important body content?

While the possibility of making spaces for girls' concerns with the body emerged, one of the criticisms of this type of work is that it is not physical activity. If educators take time to work with girls in classroom settings it decreases their opportunities to engage in physical activity. This is true. However, rather than fearing that engaging girls in critical inquiry of the body will take away from students, we might be better off seeing this type of work as a way to supplement the physical activity portion of the curriculum. That is, providing students with opportunities to critically reflect on their experiences of their bodies might help them become more physically educated. Spending two to three days per month or even one day per week might go a long way in guiding adolescent girls in the process of developing healthy habits. Journal writing, magazine critiques, and student-designed inquiry projects that focus on topics adolescents connect with their bodies might help physical education become more relevant to the lives of young people. We know that secondary physical education currently is not meeting the needs of students (Kirk & Tinning, 1994). Further, Brooker and Macdonald (1999) claim that physical educators need to create opportunities for students to heighten their critical capacities.

Having girls study their experiences of their bodies is one way to help them become more critically aware. Teachers could use these strategies to also engage students in studying physical activity and sport-related themes and how these themes relate to the ways students are learning to feel about their bodies. For example, students could study topics such: (1) how girls who play sports feel about their bodies; (2) how girls who play

sports are represented in culture; (3) how girls who exercise regularly feel about themselves; (4) how teens your age feel about physical activity; and (5) whether regular physical activity helps girls gain more self-confidence. Allowing students' interests and concerns about their bodies to enter the curriculum is one step toward making physical education more relevant to adolescents' lives.

### *Struggles in Critical Inquiry with Girls*

On the one hand, using images from teen magazines to tap girls' interests and to help them begin to express aspects of their visual worlds that they found meaningful was a crucial starting point for them in naming ways in which they experience their bodies. The girls seemed to love the magazines, were captivated with the images, and found them to be a very powerful source of information and knowledge about the body. Yet despite the pedagogical possibilities of using images from popular culture to engage adolescent girls in critically studying the body, there are also many struggles involved in this type of curriculum work.

One of the constant struggles for me was to listen to the girls limit their own life possibilities by narrating or buying into some of the more oppressive narratives that were imbedded within the magazine images and text. There were numerous times I wanted to say, 'can't you see how this can hurt you?' but knew that to push too far would not be helpful. Rather I tried to create opportunities for the girls themselves to examine the images or critique the assumptions in ways where I was not merely telling them what to think or how to feel. Dillon and Moje (1998) encourage educators and scholars to ask some hard questions about how to work with adolescents. They ask, 'How do I negotiate the fine distinction between valuing what adolescent students have to say and moving them toward challenging, disrupting, and reconstructing their experiences and discourse?' (p. 222).

As I continued to ask the girls to critique the images they were selecting I found myself writing about my frustration with this task. I wanted them to have a much more sophisticated understanding of what the images were implying about women in general, and particular groups of women specifically. I tried to remain ever so conscious of where the girls were in the process (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and tried to think of multiple ways to help them think about the images they had selected. Dillon and Moje (1998) claim that it is not sufficient to merely learn to hear and value students' voices. They write, 'We need to ask how their voices also reflect and perpetuate dominant discourses, and we need to help them ask the same types of questions' (p. 222). Engaging girls in critically studying images of the body makes spaces for both students' voices to be heard and space for helping them begin to challenge the dominant discourses, specifically in relation to girls' and women's bodies.

What I began to realize as I continued to work toward helping these girls critique images of the body was that I lacked the necessary language to communicate and connect with the girls in ways that afforded them multiple opportunities to explore the issues they were raising. More specifically, I struggled to find the language to help them examine an issue, critique an assumption, and elaborate a point.

For example, when I was trying to help Kristi name how the image she had selected of the girl in the bikini could be helpful and harmful to girls I struggled to find the language I needed to help her critique her image. What was important was that, rather than giving up when I did not have the language I needed, I struggle to create it. This in part helped me to remember just how much time, patience, and persistence are

needed to work with girls as they develop their critical capacities. I found it helpful and important to remember that this is a very slow process as it is counter-cultural and that sometimes it is simply about planting seeds rather than seeing final 'results'. This does eliminate the need to want to know whether or not what you are doing is being helpful to girls developing sense of self or whether it is more harmful. It would be far too easy to justify not engaging girls in this type of critical inquiry given the level of uncertainty or the lack of language. Nonetheless, girls need to begin asking 'why' and they need to have multiple opportunities to do so. Maxine Green (1995) writes, 'I would like to claim that this is how learning happens and that the educative task is to create situations in which the young are moved to begin to ask, in all the tones of voice there are, "Why?"' (p. 41).

If as physical educators we hope to create curricula that nurtures and extends girls' critical capacities, we need to be able to better hear where and how girls critique oppressive messages and/or representations of their bodies. Having more examples of what early adolescent critique actually looks and sounds like is crucial if we are to take the necessary steps toward helping girls identify how their bodies are represented and used in ways that are harmful to their health and well-being. We need more examples in our academic literature of how physical educators are trying to help girls develop the abilities to critique those aspects of culture that threaten to rob them of their health and well-being.

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### Notes

- [1] The research methods I describe as part of the inquiry process can also be seen as curricular tasks that can be used with students in schools. Thus, I interchange the terms research methods and curricular tasks.
- [2] Portions of the data for this paper were magazine images that the girls selected and used. However, the magazines would not give me permission to reprint the images; therefore, I am left to use written language to describe the images when necessary. This creates several interesting issues about what can be counted as research. These issues will not be explored in this particular paper.
- [3] An analysis of these themes is beyond the scope of this paper.

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